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THE
THEOLOGICAL
WORKS
OF
WILLIAM VAN MILDERT, D. D.

LATE LORD BISHOP OF DURHAM.

IN SIX VOLUMES.

VOL. VI.
SERMONS AT LINCOLN'S INN.

OXFORD,
PRINTED BY S. COLLINGWOOD, PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY,
FOR JOHN HENRY PARKER;
AND J. G. AND F. RIVINGTON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD,
AND WATERLOO PLACE, PALL MALL, LONDON.

MDCCCXXXVIII.

SERMONS

PREACHED BEFORE

THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY OF

LINCOLN'S INN,

FROM THE YEAR 1812 TO THE YEAR 1819,

BY

WILLIAM VAN MILDERT, D. D.

PREACHER OF LINCOLN'S INN,

NOW BISHOP OF DURHAM.

1832.

SECOND EDITION.

VOL. II.

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MDCCCXXXII.

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[Printed June 1812.]

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I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation.

PRIDE and prejudice were the great obstacles with which Christianity had to contend, on its first appearance in the world. To the Jews, bigoted to their own Law, and fondly indulging the expectation of a temporal Deliverer, it was “a stumbling-block.” To the Greeks and other heathen unbelievers, vain of their philosophy and imaginary wisdom, it appeared to be “foolishness,” a system unworthy of their acceptance or regard. Prejudices strong and deep-rooted, widely differing from each other, yet springing from the same source of arrogance and self-sufficiency, operated in both cases to produce a determined opposition to the clearest proofs that could be set before them of the Divine authority of the Gospel.

The Apostle nevertheless begins this Epistle to the Romans with a declaration that he is “not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ.” He also assures them that he was very desirous, had he not been hindered by untoward circumstances, to preach it in person at Rome; having received a special call unreservedly to declare its truths “both to the Greeks and the Barbarians, both to the wise and the unwise.” The religion he was commissioned to promulgate had no respect of persons; it was not confined to high or low, rich or poor, learned or unlearned; it was “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believed, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” It was revealed, to instruct mankind in general what they must do to inherit eternal life, and was confirmed by evidences the most incontrovertible of its Divine authority. Thus recommending itself to universal acceptance, it was a system of which no Preacher ought to be ashamed, and to which indeed, nothing parallel could be produced, either by Jew or Gentile, as to dignity or importance.

With the same unhesitating confidence, every one now invested with the office of the Christian ministry is bound to declare the sacred truths of the Gospel; and, with-

out reserve or fear, to assert its pretensions, against all opponents; to set forth its inestimable benefits, to unfold its purposes, and to urge the necessity of firmly upholding its doctrines, and making its precepts the rule of life and conversation. To swerve from this duty were to betray a most sacred trust, and to incur the fearful condemnation which St. Paul invokes upon himself, could he have been guilty of the offence, “Wo unto me, “if I preach not the Gospel^a.”

When we consider, however, the *reason* why the Apostle was not ashamed of the Gospel, namely, “that it is the power of God “unto salvation,” we shall perceive that the obligation openly to avow its excellence is by no means confined to those whose especial office it is to inculcate it upon others, but extends to *all* who make profession of the faith. If the Christian religion be what it is represented to be, no one can be exempt from the obligation to diffuse its benefits as widely as possible. The disposition to do this seems, indeed, to be almost inseparable from a sincere persuasion of its truths.

For what is the Gospel of Christ? It is a system of mercy and truth, adapted, in all its circumstances and provisions, to such crea-

^a 1 Cor. ix. 16.

tures as we find ourselves to be. It addresses us as beings endowed with reason and understanding, yet continually misled by unruly wills and affections, beset by temptations from within and from without, conscious oftentimes that “the good we would, “we do not, and the evil we would not, that “we do^b ;” conscious also that we have no power to deliver ourselves from this thralldom, or to avert the punishment due to every wilful offence, to every actual deviation from known duty. To creatures thus circumstanced the Gospel is expressly addressed. To those who are “weary and heavy laden^c” with the burthen of sin, it offers pardon and restoration of the Divine favour; to the penitent it opens the door of reconciliation; to the faithful it addresses itself in the language of hope, of joy, of peace. It shews how, in the wonderful counsels of the Almighty, “mercy and truth, righteousness and “peace have met together^d.” It points out the way to life, and assists in the attainment of it. However humbled the believer may be from a sense of unworthiness or infirmity, it “leaves him not comfortless,” it gives him strength for the conflict, it alleviates his trou-

^b Rom. vii. 19.^c Matth. xi. 28.^d Psalm lxxxv. 10.

bles, it soothes his sorrows, it heightens his enjoyments. At the same time, it reveals to us the Source whence these blessings are derived, and on what firm foundations our assurance of them is grounded. Our faith is built “on the foundation of the Prophets and the “Apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the “chief corner stone^e.” “By the mystery of “His holy Incarnation, by His holy Nativity “and Circumcision, by His Baptism, Fasting, “and Temptation, by His Agony and bloody “sweat, by His Cross and Passion, by His “precious Death and Burial, by His glorious “Resurrection and Ascension, and by the “coming of the Holy Ghost,” our deliverance from sin and misery has been effected. And Who has thus wrought our deliverance? Even He who, though to mortal eye compassed with human infirmity like ourselves, verified to the fullest extent the prediction of the Evangelical Prophet, that “His name “should be called Wonderful, Counsellor, “the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, “the Prince of Peace^f.”

What reasonable being would submit to the imputation of being *ashamed* of a religion like this? Or who can hesitate in acknowledging it to be “worthy of all ac-

^e Ephes. ii. 20.

^f Isaiah ix. 6.

“tation §?” Does it not recommend itself throughout to our most anxious hopes and desires? Is it not adapted precisely to those wants and exigencies which we find most urgent, and for which no other system has ever made provision? Look to the ransom it provides for us, the helps it holds out to us, the promises of life and immortality, the means of being raised from the death of sin to the life of righteousness;—and say, whether these are not privileges to boast of and to rejoice in; privileges, for which our thankfulness to the Giver should be testified, by “telling of His salvation from day to day?”—To all who are partakers of these benefits is addressed that warning of the Old Testament, “Them that honour me, I will honour; and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed^h:”—and that of our Lord himself, “Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man also be ashamed, when He cometh in the glory of the Father with the holy angelsⁱ.”

Nevertheless, there ever has been, and there ever will be, a disinclination in fallen man to receive these truths in their full extent. They call forth humiliating reflections.

§ 1 Tim. i. 15.

^h 1 Sam. ii. 30.

ⁱ Mark viii. 38.

They presuppose the weakness and the guilt of man. They regard him as naturally incapable of attaining that knowledge and that happiness to which he most ardently aspires. The Gospel lays low every lofty imagination, and suffers not the conceit of intellectual or of moral excellence to exalt itself against “the wisdom that is from above.” Where the heart or the understanding has taken a wrong bias, it peremptorily enjoins the submission of both to an authority from which there is no appeal. In all ages and in all countries, whether under refinement or barbarism, these essential characteristics of Revealed Religion have occasioned impediments to its reception. For it is not only upon highly cultivated minds that this effect has been produced. Pride may accompany ignorance as well as learning; and prejudice may be equally stubborn in the one case as in the other. The devotee of the grossest superstition may glory in his error and despise the proffered truth, no less pertinaciously than the philosopher who will worship nothing but the idol of his own creating. Various circumstances also may concur to add strength to these prepossessions. When Christianity was first promulgated to the world, it had to demolish the strongest holds that error can occupy in the human

heart. The Jew had a religion which he justly revered for its Divine original, although he had misunderstood and misapplied its purpose. The Greek had a religion with pretensions to high antiquity, and though a baseless fabric, yet one whose pomp and pageantry raised it in the estimation of the ignorant worshipper far above the lowly and unostentatious religion of Jesus. The self-important philosopher aspired to something more transcendent, in his estimation, than either of these. Trusting to the resources of his own fertile mind, or enriched by the labours of his predecessors in the same pursuits, and, perhaps, by fragments of Revealed Religion scattered through the Gentile world, he was occupied in framing theories which he fondly deemed to be the result of his superior sagacity and discernment. To these different classes of hearers the Gospel was at first addressed; and whoever considers the strength of such prepossessions and dispositions, will not wonder at what was said of it to St. Paul by some of his own countrymen, "As concerning this sect, we know "that every where it is spoken against^k." Rather may we wonder that, notwithstanding

^k Acts xxviii. 22.

such discouragements, the Apostle continued “preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concerned the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence¹ ;” resolutely avowing that he was “not ashamed” of that religion which persons so opposite in character and in sentiment had concurred in treating with contumely or neglect.

Quitting, however, the records of earlier times, it is of more importance to ourselves to consider what motives *now* prevail to produce similar results. At this advanced period of the Christian æra, when the Gospel has stood the trial of eighteen centuries, and has been received and established in all the most civilized nations upon earth, it might be deemed almost superfluous to urge the necessity of not being ashamed of its truths ; when to condemn or to disavow it, would seem to give the greater cause for public scandal and reproach. Yet a cursory glance at the present state of Christianity among us, may shew that there is still too much cause for anxiety in this respect.

Not many years have elapsed since Infidelity made rapid strides in almost every Christian country, and its advocates seemed confident in their expectations that Chris-

¹ Acts xxviii. 31.

tianity would soon be driven to hide its head, or its light be eclipsed by the intervention of a new and brighter luminary. *That* time has passed by; and (blessed be God!) those expectations have not yet been fulfilled. The Gospel still survives the attack, has stood the fiery ordeal, and come out unhurt. Of the Gospel, therefore, in the *general* acceptance of the term, there seems but little temptation *now* for any man to be ashamed. He may profess it in public, as well as practise it in private, without any imputation upon his understanding, without any sacrifice of worldly interest, without any loss of reputation. Neither is there at present much want of outward respect to its pretensions, or of outward profession of its truth. Clamours, indeed, are still occasionally raised against it; it is still assailed with scoffs, and sneers, and railing accusations; but it nevertheless rears its front in society; and, strong in itself, and in the multitude of its undismayed adherents, succumbs not either to violence or insult.

But let not this induce us to imagine that the danger of being tempted to reject the Gospel, or to swerve from an honest and open acknowledgment of its doctrines or its precepts, is entirely gone by. It is not only by an absolute denial of either of these, that

we become chargeable with being “ashamed of the testimony of our Lord.” He who shrinks from its vindication and defence; he who takes no part in promoting its diffusion and increase; he who halts between two opinions, and, through a false liberality, distinguishes not between truth and error; he who believes one part of Scripture, and disbelieves another; who admits this doctrine, and rejects that, whether from being wise in his own conceit, or in compliance with the sinister persuasions of others; may be said to be “ashamed of our Lord and of His word,” and to incur the fearful condemnation already adverted to;—“of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when He cometh in the glory of His Father.”

That such examples as these are not unfrequent, who will venture to deny? Of sober-minded zeal, of well-regulated piety, of tenacious adherence to the pure doctrine and discipline of the Gospel, the proofs are surely far from being so general or so unequivocal as to render admonitions in these respects unseasonable. Some are ashamed of its peculiar *doctrines*; some, of its more rigid *precepts*. To believe in mysteries, the philosopher holds to be unworthy of the man of intellect. To live up to the strict rules of the Gospel, the

man of the world fears would subject him to ridicule. Vanity influences some, timidity others, to deny or to suppress before men what, perhaps, in secret they dare not disavow. Herein lurk the seeds of many an heterodox persuasion, and many a neglect or violation of duty. The half-read Scripturist hears, perhaps, some passages of the Bible made the subject of a cavil or a jest, which he is incompetent to repel; and though his faith be not absolutely overcome, his fear of ridicule prevails to the suppression of his honest sentiments. The sciolist, under similar circumstances, solicitous to maintain his reputation both as a Christian and a philosopher, sets himself to adapt the Bible to the scepticism of its opponents, by interpreting miracles, prophecies, and doctrines, so as almost to supersede Divine interposition, and to render *inspiration* a term of dubious meaning. What is it but a false sense of shame that prompts to these departures from the simplicity of truth, and “loveth the praise of men more than the praise of God^m?” Actuated by this degrading sentiment, many a man shews to the world a pattern, not only of laxity of principle, but of such palpable deviation from Christian conduct, as in his heart he disap-

^m John xii. 43.

proves; regardless of that inestimable maxim of the Apostle, “Happy is he who condemneth not himself in that thing which he allowethⁿ.”

There can be little doubt that this false shame has had considerable influence in increasing the number of parties and divisions in the Church. Every man is inclined to denominate his own particular views of Christianity “the Gospel of Christ,” to the exclusion of all other views of it, sanctioned by whatever authority. Attaching himself, therefore, to such bodies as coincide with him in this persuasion, he becomes more confident in the avowal of his opinions, and even goes forth in the spirit of proselytism to spread and extend them. However timid or reluctant before, he now courts observation, feeling strong in the protection of numbers, though at the hazard of “making shipwreck of his faith.” That many have thus fallen into the snares of Socinianism and even Deism on the one hand, or of Fanaticism and Superstition on the other, can hardly be doubted. Such at least, is not unlikely to be the progress of an unstable mind, in its efforts to overcome that infirmity of purpose, which is “tossed about by every wind of doctrine,” unable to withstand the

ⁿ Rom. xiv. 22.

assailants of its peace, however weak or contemptible. Amidst the zeal, therefore, which is manifested for conflicting opinions, and the confidence with which they appear to be maintained, it may still be questioned whether a firm attachment to pure and genuine Christianity, abstracted from party purposes or secular views, has increased among us. From being ashamed of the simple unadulterated truths of the Gospel, it is an easy transition to adopt some factitious representation of it under the influence of favourite teachers; and whether those teachers ground their popularity on “adding to” its sacred truths, or “taking from” them, the effect may be equally injurious. Nor will the evil terminate with the parties themselves. Many seeing the Gospel thus exhibited in various and even opposite characters, begin to think lightly of it in *every* form, and to hold it in disrespect. Judging it by the misrepresentations of others, they become indifferent, if not hostile, to the entire system; and are led even rashly to abandon that which otherwise it would have been their pride to retain. Thus may too sensitive an apprehension of the censure or ridicule of others, terminate in justly bringing discredit upon themselves.

Against these evils there can be no effectual security, but in such a firm conviction of the truth and excellency of the Gospel itself, of its perfect adaptation to our necessities, and of its efficacy as “the power of God unto salvation,” as will determine us to accept it in all its particulars, without reservation or exception. If Scripture be indeed the word of God, vain must be the wisdom of man in opposition to it, or the attempt to modify it in deference to human imaginations. It must be received, or rejected, as a *whole*; not “divided against itself;” not “handled deceitfully,” for the purpose of adjusting it to the prepossessions either of ourselves or others. A miracle or a prophecy must not be resolved into natural causes, to suit the taste of a sceptical philosopher. A matter of fact must not be turned into a vision or an allegory, because a fastidious inquirer cannot find any thing parallel to it in the ordinary course of human events. A specific injunction or prohibition must not be rashly set aside, in compliment to the prevailing spirit of the age we live in, or because it is at variance with certain worldly practices or maxims. The test, that we are not ashamed of our religion, will be found in openly and manfully upholding the real truth and spirit of Holy Writ,

against all efforts of the vain and thoughtless to weaken its sanctions, or to bereave us of its consolations. Without this, no man can be assured of “holding fast his integrity.” He will be an easy prey to every scoffer that would undermine his faith or his practice. He will be instrumental also to the falling off of others ; a powerful though unintentional agent of unbelief and unrighteousness, by his own imbecility and irresolution.

The example of the Apostle, then, has lost nothing of its interest or importance by change of circumstances or by lapse of time ; nor will it diminish in value even to the end of the world. Until the period arrive when “all things that offend shall be gathered out^p ;” it must be the lot of the faithful Christian through “evil report and good report^q” to contend for the prize that is set before him ; and, to prepare for the conflict, he must “take unto him the whole armour of God^r.” “By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left^s,” he will be fortified against the snares of temptation, the illusions of raillery, the scoffs of the profane,

^p Matth. xiii. 41.

^r Ephes. vi. 13.

^q 2 Cor. vi. 8.

^s 2 Cor. vi. 7.

the insults of overbearing and dictatorial self-sufficiency. And while thus provided for his own defence, he will become a tower of strength to his fellow-labourers in the same cause. Every effectual resistance *he* makes to the adversary, will be so much gained to *their* confidence. Every temptation *he* escapes, will be a succour also to them who are in like wise tempted. Such indeed is the influence of individual conduct, whether of pusillanimity on the one hand, or of constancy on the other, that none can be fully aware, to what extent his own personal demeanour may operate, in the increase of good or evil. But however incalculable or however doubtful this may be, none can question the reward, both temporal and eternal, which a faith and practice regulated upon such a principle will ensure to the individual himself. That Gospel which is “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth,” can never fail of its effect, where it is both faithfully and practically received. It “has the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come^t.” Not only will its future recompense exceed all that we can ask or think ; but,

^t 1 Tim. iv. 8.

during this our earthly pilgrimage, it will
“ fill us with all joy and peace in believing^v ;”
“ the Spirit itself bearing witness with our
“ spirit, that we are the sons of God^w. ”

^v Rom. xv. 13.

^w Rom. viii. 16.

SERMON II.

MATT. xi. 10.

This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

IN the series of wonderful events introductory to the coming of the Messiah, those which relate to his immediate fore-runner, John the Baptist, have especial claims to our consideration. The testimony which he bore to our Blessed Saviour was singular in its kind, and so essential to the purpose for which it was given, that without it there would have been wanting one most important link in the chain of evidence by which the whole Christian Revelation is upholden. This gives to the history and character of the Baptist an interest greater, perhaps, than that of any other descendant of Adam, (our Lord only excepted,) whose name is recorded in Holy Writ. Our Lord himself suggests this, when he says of him, “ This is he of whom it is

“ written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee ;” and again, when he affirms of him that he was “ more than a Prophet^a,” and that “ among them that were born of women there had not arisen a greater than he^b.” John also proclaimed himself to be “ the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias^c ;” that harbinger of “ the dayspring from on high,” sent to announce his immediate appearance, and to prepare the world for his reception.

The proofs of these pretensions on the part of the Baptist were of a peculiar kind. He himself wrought no *miracles* ; yet his own birth was attended by miraculous circumstances. His office was altogether distinct from that of the *Prophets* in general, yet he himself was foretold by the Prophets. The Prophets knew not what individual person among the Jews would answer to their description of the Messiah ; but to John it was specially revealed that *Jesus* was the Christ. He received also by immediate inspiration a more perfect knowledge of the nature of our Lord’s kingdom, and the de-

^a Matth. xi. 9.

^b Matth. xi. 11.

^c John i. 23.

sign of his coming, than had been communicated to the Prophets, or than even any of the Apostles attained to, until after the effusion of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

The circumstances attending the birth of John were evidently supernatural, and are established by evidence the most unexceptionable. The message delivered by an angel to his father Zacharias, the sudden loss of speech inflicted upon Zacharias for his slowness to believe the divine message, the no less instantaneous restoration of it on the accomplishment of the prediction, and his burst of prophetic rapture when the event took place, are told by St. Luke with that simplicity and clearness which bespeak the narrator of known and acknowledged facts. Nor can any delusion or deception be reasonably supposed, in matters which occurred under the immediate observation of many persons who could have no interest in believing, or in spreading the belief of them, had they not been true. “The “people,” according to the Evangelist, “wait-
“ed^d” for their aged pastor, when he first saw the vision, and witnessed its effect upon him when he returned. Probably a numerous assembly was also present at the circumcision of

^d Luke i. 21.

the infant, when the tongue of his venerable parent was loosed, and he declared his son to be “the Prophet of the Highest, who should “go before the face of the Lord to prepare “his ways^e.” “And,” it is said, “fear came “on all that dwelt round about them; and all “these sayings were noised abroad through- “out all the hill country of Judæa. And all “they that heard them laid them up in their “hearts, saying, What manner of child shall “this be^f?” Such was the publicity of the whole procedure, leaving no room for suspicion of fraud, of collusion, or of credulity in any of the parties concerned.

The circumstances attending also the conception and birth of our Lord himself afford a strong confirmation of those relating to the Baptist. Though the two events are so connected as to appear almost dependent on each other; yet are they of such a kind as to make it utterly inconceivable that a combination between the parties to impose upon the world could have succeeded under any circumstances, however favourable to the attempt, much less by persons of such blameless characters, and such obscure stations of life, as those who were here concerned. All such suspicions are indeed effectually removed, not

^e Luke i. 76.

^f Luke i. 65, 66.

only by the declared publicity of the whole transaction, but also by the total absence of any proof, or even any surmise, of such imposture, on the part of the Jews themselves. That John the Baptist was held in great personal veneration by the Jews, even by those who refused to acknowledge either him or his Lord in the characters they assumed, is evident from the narratives of the Evangelists, and also from the testimonies of Josephus and other Jewish historians. That his parents were highly esteemed, appears from the uncontradicted declaration of St. Luke, that they “walked in all the commandments and “ordinances of the Lord blameless^s.” That the mother of Jesus was also of unsullied reputation is to be inferred from the conduct of the Jewish rulers, who, notwithstanding their implacable hatred of her Son, appear not in any instance to have cast the slightest imputation upon *her* conduct, nor to have shewn the least disposition to implicate her in any of the accusations urged against our Lord himself. With such proofs of the estimation in which these parties were held, the evidence of the facts relating to them stands clear of a shadow of pretence for calling their reality in question.

^s Luke i. 6.

Another strong testimony of the Divine mission of the Baptist arises from the fulfilment of prophecy in his person. It was peculiar to him, among the messengers of the Most High, that he shared with his Lord in the distinction of being personally foretold by the ancient prophets. The prophet Isaiah, announcing the glad tidings of the Gospel, exclaims, (as if he had actually heard the Baptist preaching in the wilderness,) “The voice
“of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight
“in the desert a highway for our God. Every
“valley shall be exalted, and every mountain
“and hill laid low: and the crooked shall be
“made straight, and the rough places plain;
“and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
“and all flesh shall see it together^h.” These highly figurative expressions strikingly represent the wonderful changes to be produced by the preaching of the Gospel, and the manner in which it would be taught by the Baptist himself; the superiority of whose teaching was in no circumstance more remarkable than in his declarations of the spiritual nature of the Messiah’s kingdom. He preached the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins in a manner almost, if not altogether,

^h Isaiah xl. 3, 4, 5.

new to the generality of his hearers; not as a mere outward token of purification from pollutions incurred by violation of the Jewish law, but as an inward purification of the heart, springing from a deep sense of guilt, and an earnest desire to embrace the redemption offered them through that “Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the worldⁱ.” This, he taught them, was to be wrought by HIM whose baptism would be accompanied with a power and efficacy to which John’s baptism was only subordinate and introductory:—“I, indeed, baptize you with *water*; but One mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose; He shall baptize you with the *Holy Ghost* and with *fire*^k.” He corrected also the erroneous impressions of the Jews respecting their exclusive privileges as the people of God; intimating their rejection in consequence of their unbelief, and the admission of the Gentiles into the Christian covenant. However clearly this doctrine may appear to *us* to be deducible from the scriptures of the Old Testament, it is evident that the Jews, for the most part, overlooked it, or applied it to other circumstances or events. This unwelcome truth the Baptist enforced with peculiar earnest-

ⁱ John i. 29.

^k Matth. iii. 11.

ness: "O generation of vipers," he exclaims, addressing the hypocritical Pharisees who came to be baptized of him, "who hath warned *you* to flee from the wrath to come? "Bring forth, therefore, fruits meet for repentance; and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father; for "I say unto you, that God is able of these "*stones*" (these *Gentiles* whom ye so despise) "to raise up children unto Abraham¹."

Thus did this chosen servant of God preach evangelical righteousness to them who had hitherto trusted entirely to the outward observance of the law. He taught that the meek and lowly and contrite in heart were to be exalted by faith in the Redeemer; that the high and haughty, whether Jew or Gentile, were to bring into captivity every lofty imagination to the obedience of Christ; that the crooked and perverse ways of men were now to be relinquished for the plain and straight paths pointed out to them by the Saviour of the world; that the glory of the Lord was about to be revealed by the immediate appearance of the Son of God; and that "all "flesh," all mankind without respect of persons, should see it together," and be admitted to a joint participation in its blessings.

¹ Matth. iii. 7, 8, 9.

The effect of this preaching was no less extraordinary. From that time, “the kingdom of heaven,” as our Lord expressed it, “suffered violence, and the violent took it by force^m.” People of every description, Jews and Gentiles, Pharisees and Publicans, Sadducees and Roman soldiers, strangers to the law of Moses, together with the seed of Abraham, pressed with ardour to hear the preacher’s doctrine and to receive his baptism; verifying another figurative prediction of the same prophet, “the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the lion and the ox, shall lie down togetherⁿ.”

In the conduct of the Baptist was also fulfilled one of the most remarkable prophecies, that of Malachi, the last of the Hebrew Prophets; “Behold, I will send you *Elijah the Prophet*, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse^o.”

There prevailed an universal persuasion among the Jews, that before the appearance of the Messiah “*Elias must first come*.” Our Lord, too, expressly said, “Elias verily com-

^m Matth. xi. 10.

ⁿ Isa. xi. 6.

^o Mal. iv. 5, 6.

“eth first, and restoreth all things:” but he added, “I say unto you, that *Elias is indeed* “*come*, and they have done unto him what-soever they listed^p ;” evidently adverting to John the Baptist, whom Herod had recently put to death. Speaking elsewhere of John, he also says, “If ye will receive it, *this is* “*Elias* which was for to come^q.” The Jews, however, interpreting the prophecy in too strictly literal a sense, conceived that Elijah the Tishbite, who had lived in the reign of Ahab, was *personally* to re-appear on earth. Therefore, when they sent a message to John, inquiring if *he* were Elias, “he answered, I “am *not*^r ;” meaning he was not *that* Elias whom they expected: and to this misapprehension on their part our Lord seems to allude, when he says, “*If ye will receive it,*” (If, that is, ye will understand the prophecy in its true spirit and signification,) ye will find it to be fulfilled in John the Baptist. There is no contradiction therefore between our Lord’s testimony and that of John. *Both* intended to draw the attention of the Jews to the *spirit* rather than the *letter* of the prophecy, and to lead them to compare it with the Baptist’s character and office; whence they might readily discern its fulfilment.

^p Mark ix. 12, 13. ^q Matth. xi. 14. ^r John i. 21.

The message of the angel to Zacharias before the birth of John had, indeed, already given the only correct interpretation of the prophecy, that he should “go before him” (that is, before Christ) “in the *spirit* and *power* “of Elias^s.” This was the proper clue to Malachi’s prediction, “Behold, I will send “you Elijah the prophet;”—not the *identical* person Elijah, but one who, with that *spirit* and *power* which so preeminently distinguished Elijah, should go forth to warn the Jews to embrace the faith of that Christ whom their fathers of old had hoped for and expected, lest by rejecting him as their Saviour, they should be involved in one general sentence of condemnation with an impenitent and unbelieving world.

The resemblance, indeed, between John the Baptist and the prophet Elijah was very remarkable. Both were distinguished by austere habits of life, by extraordinary sanctity and self-denial, by long-continued seclusion from the world. Both, in due season, came forth from the deserts with zeal, and promptitude, and an undaunted spirit, to visit the abodes of men, to reprove their iniquities, to reclaim them from their errors, and to carry even into courts and palaces

^s Luke i. 17.

the voice of admonition and rebuke. Elijah recalled the people from the worship of Baal to that of the True God. John roused his hearers from a state of moral and religious corruption to practical holiness and virtue, and to faith in that Redeemer who alone was "mighty to save." The Tishbite boldly sought out Ahab, and denounced the judgments of God against him and his house for their grievous abominations. The Baptist, with no less intrepidity, set before Herod the enormity of his offences, and became the victim of the adulteress's bloodthirsty revenge. Both were signalized as preachers of righteousness, "turning the hearts of the "disobedient to the wisdom of the just," and converting men from false views of religion to the worship of God "in spirit and in "truth." So closely did the type and the anti-type correspond in the most striking features of character and conduct!

John the Baptist, however, was "*more than a Prophet.*" He was invested with a still higher commission, singular in its kind, and with powers of a new and extraordinary description.

Whether the Prophets of old did themselves clearly and fully apprehend, in their *spiritual* signification, many of their own

predictions, may reasonably be questioned. The Apostles also were “slow to believe,” in this acceptation, “all that the Prophets had “spoken.” But the Baptist, even before the commencement of our Lord’s ministry, announced him in terms clearly signifying the spiritual nature of the Christian dispensation. His prediction that our Lord would “baptize them with the Holy Ghost and with “fire” evidently implied this, and was signally verified in the miracle of the day of Pentecost. When the Spirit visibly descended upon Jesus at his baptism, and a voice from God the Father declared him to be his “beloved Son, in whom he was well pleased,” John instantly “bare record that *this* was the “*Son of God*.” No less distinctly did he declare his *preexistence* :—“This is He of “whom I spake, He that cometh after me is “preferred before me ; for *He was before “me* ;”—before him, that is, in his divine and heavenly existence, though after him as to his birth in this earthly state. By him, too, was our Saviour pointed out expressly as “the Lamb of God which taketh away the “sins of the world ;”—not a temporal conqueror or potentate, invested with pomp and splendour, but a *suffering Redeemer*, a de-

^t John i. 34.

^v John i. 30.

voted victim, expiating by his death the guilt of all who would in faith and practice accept him as their Deliverer. Yet did John assert, in terms most awfully impressive, the judicial authority of this his heavenly Lord and Master, “whose fan,” said he, “is in his hand, and he “will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather “his wheat into the garner, but will burn up “the chaff with unquenchable fire”^w.”

It could only be by special inspiration from above, that the Baptist was thus gifted to set forth the character, dignity, and office of the Redeemer. From no other source could he have derived so clear intimations of those fundamental articles of the Christian faith, our Lord’s *Divinity*, the *Atonement* He made for sin, our *Justification* through faith in Him, and our *Sanctification* through the Holy Spirit. He appears, therefore, in this respect, not only as a Prophet, but as an *inspired Interpreter* of Prophecy, teaching the Jews how to understand and to apply their own Scriptures, with reference to that Divine Person in whom they were to be accomplished. Such indeed was the perfection of his teaching in this respect, that we find our Blessed Saviour not unfrequently adopting the very expressions of his messenger and

^w Matth. iii. 12.

fore-runner; applying to himself the same appellations, and using the same phraseology that the Baptist had used, relative to the nature of His baptism, the descent of the Holy Ghost, the impending ruin of the Jewish state, and his final coming to judgment;—as if desirous thus to point out the perfect harmony and coincidence between his own doctrine and that which had been taught them by his venerable Precursor.

But pre-eminently as the Baptist was thus distinguished above all others who had preceded him, his whole demeanour was marked by the lowliest reverence towards that MIGHTIER ONE whom he came to announce. On our Lord's approach to receive baptism at his hands, John (probably warned by an immediate revelation that this was the promised Messiah) shrunk from performing the office, until encouraged and authorized by Christ himself. And though his preaching excited extraordinary admiration, insomuch that “all men mused in their hearts, whether *he* was the *Christ*^x,” yet his only solicitude was to bring men to HIM who was indeed the CHRIST. He took no glory to himself. “He confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the *Christ*^y.” Unlike a deceiver or an enthu-

^x Luke iii. 15.

^y John i. 20.

siast, he sought not his own fame or interest ; but devoted all his labours to making proselytes to Christ himself. His sole object was “ to bear witness of the Light, that all men “ through him might believe^z.”

The only passage in the history of this extraordinary person which seems to militate against these representations of him, is the message which he sent, whilst in prison, to Jesus, “ Art thou He that should come, or do “ we look for another^a?” It has been conjectured, that John, thus persecuted by Herod, and seeing no prospect of deliverance from imprisonment, began either to entertain doubts respecting our Saviour, or to feel dissatisfaction from being thus left to suffer in the cause of righteousness. But neither of these suppositions appears well to consist with the previous history. For in addition to the miraculous testimony which John had received from heaven of our Lord’s divine character and office, it is stated that he had heard, while he was in prison, of “ the works “ of Jesus ;” nor is it to be doubted that, before then, he had continually heard, if he had not even been an eyewitness, of his miracles. Nay, he himself had said of Christ, “ *He must increase, but I must decrease*^b ;”

^z John i. 7.

^a Matth. xi. 3.

^b John iii. 30.

plainly forewarning his followers of the decline of his own reputation and authority, in proportion as our Lord advanced in public notice and general estimation. It has, therefore, been generally thought more probable, that the intent of the message was rather to satisfy his *disciples* than *himself*; that they who delivered it might see and hear, and be convinced that HE was the person that should come, and that they were *not* to look for another. Accordingly, our Lord wrought several miracles on the spot; and having done so, he dismissed them with a warning of the danger of being “offended in Him;” a caution probably necessary, from their having entertained some unworthy mistrust or jealousy, on account of his seeming neglect of their suffering master. No sooner, indeed, had they departed, than Jesus, as if to remove any unfavourable impression among the multitude concerning John, began to say unto them, “What went ye out into the wilderness to see? a reed shaken with the wind?”—a person wavering and irresolute in his conduct?—But “what went ye out for to see? a man clothed in soft raiment?”—a man feeble-minded or self-indulgent, who would shrink from suffering and persecution?—“But what went ye out for to see? a

“ prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more
“ than a prophet. And verily I say unto you,
“ Among them that are born of women there
“ hath not risen a greater than John the
“ Baptist.” Thus did our Lord embrace
the opportunity of correcting any prejudice
or misconception concerning him, which this
occurrence might have created; and thus did
the message itself, sent by the Baptist while
imprisoned and debarred of any public ex-
ercise of his ministry, give occasion to spread
the knowledge of his Lord’s wonderful works,
and to add converts to the truth; that truth
for the reception of which it had been the
purpose of his own ministry to prepare man-
kind. If, however, that exposition be adopt-
ed, which ascribes the message to certain
misgivings or misapprehensions on the part
of the Baptist himself, we can only regard
it as a proof (if proof were needful) that
even this distinguished servant and mes-
senger of the Most High was not exempt
from human infirmity; but was for an in-
stant overcome, either by the pressure of se-
vere adversity, or by the surmises and sug-
gestions of those who still adhered to him,
and who might be urgent that he should af-
ford both them and himself the means of

having their doubts and fears removed. On that supposition, our Lord's instant performance of sundry miracles, and his prompt and immediate testimony to the character of John, may be regarded as a striking instance of his sympathy with the sufferings of his illustrious coadjutor; his considerate tenderness towards both him and his disciples, who erred not from any "evil heart of unbelief;" and his solicitude that not even a momentary impression should be left on the minds of his hearers, to the disparagement of one who had so faithfully discharged his high commission, and who was now on the point of suffering death for his inflexible adherence to the cause of righteousness and truth.

Thus did that "burning and shining light^d," as he was emphatically called by our Blessed Saviour, bear witness to the truth of our holy religion by his doctrine, and precepts, and his whole demeanour, as well as by the extraordinary purpose of the high and holy office committed to his charge. In contemplating these, our faith cannot but be strengthened in that Saviour whom he announced to mankind, and our conceptions enlarged of that stupendous wisdom and goodness, by which the mighty work of our

^d John v. 35.

Redemption was carried on from the beginning; being gradually unfolded from the fall of Adam to that “fulness of time,” when the Son of God himself came forth, to accomplish all that had been prefigured or foretold. We learn too from that zeal and fortitude, that holiness and humility, which marked the character of this great luminary of the Gospel, the duties that are most imperative upon us as disciples of Christ; that we should “keep ourselves unspotted from the world,” endeavour to stem the torrent of impiety and immorality even in the worst of times, and “let our light so shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven.”

These are lessons of *general* importance. More *special* instruction might hence also be given to those who are called to the sacred office of the Christian Ministry. The Baptist, at our Lord’s *first* coming, was sent to “prepare his way before him,” by preaching repentance and faith. The “ministers and stewards of his mysteries” are *now* commissioned “so to prepare and make ready his way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at his *second* coming to judge the world, they may be found an acceptable people in his sight.”

The Divine Founder of our religion “ gave
 “ some Apostles, and some Prophets, and
 “ some Pastors and Teachers, for the perfect-
 “ ing of the saints, for the work of the Minis-
 “ try, for the edifying of the body of Christ ^e.”
 Upon this foundation the Apostles were com-
 missioned to erect an universal Church ; and
 for its perpetual continuance our Lord him-
 self hath promised to “ be with it,” in spirit
 and in power, “ even unto the end of the
 “ world.” The great *purpose* of this Divine
 institution is, “ that ye henceforth be no more
 “ children, tossed to and fro, and carried
 “ about with every wind of doctrine,” but
 that “ speaking the truth in love, ye may
 “ grow up into Him in all things, which is
 “ the Head, even Christ ^f.”

May He, then, who alone can bless all our
 endeavours to any effectual purpose, grant us
 “ a right judgment in all things,” and “ pros-
 “ per the work of our hands upon us.” May
 He enable us “ diligently to preach His holy
 “ Word, and the people obediently to follow
 “ the same, that they may receive the crown
 “ of everlasting glory, through Jesus Christ
 “ our Lord.”

^e Ephes. iv. 11, 12.

^f Ephes. iv. 15.

SERMON III.

MATTHEW xiii. 16, 17.

But blessed are your eyes, for they see : and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them ; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

OUR Blessed Saviour addressed these words to his disciples shortly after he had delivered the parable of the Sower. In that parable he described the effect which the preaching of the Gospel would produce upon persons of different characters and dispositions. Some, from total indifference to its heavenly truths, would hear, but not understand. Others would listen to it with a degree of satisfaction and even with an intention to profit by it, but would in time of temptation fall away. Others would “ bring no fruit to perfection,” being “ choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this world.” A better class of hearers, receiving it with “ an

“ honest and good heart,” would not only hear and understand it, but treasure up its truths, and practise its injunctions ; “ bringing forth fruit some an hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty ;” according to their respective abilities, and the opportunities afforded them of “ adorning the doctrine of God their Saviour in all things.”

Such was the purport of this parable, as explained by our Lord himself. His disciples had previously inquired of him, why he addressed the multitude in discourses of this kind ; clothing his instructions in a figurative dress, rather than in terms of plain and literal signification ; “ *Why speakest thou unto them in Parables^a ?*” In reply to this question, our Lord intimates, that those disciples who constantly attended on his Ministry, and gave proofs of their disposition to receive his doctrine with humility, were better qualified than others to be taught its truths in plain and simple language : but that upon the perverse or inconsiderate, whom neither his miracles nor his discourses could persuade to acknowledge him as a Teacher sent from God, such a direct and explicit mode of teaching would produce no effect. “ Seeing, they would not see, or perceive ; hearing, they would

^a Matt. xiii. 10—15.

“not hear or understand.” Their pride revolted at the application of it to themselves, and their perverseness determined them to resist its purpose. He, therefore, spake unto them in *parables*: to awaken their attention, and to convey, without their immediately perceiving it, moral and spiritual truths. Their improvement under this mode of teaching, would enable them to bear more explicit declarations of the “things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” For “*whosoever hath,*” saith our Lord, “to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance;” whosoever retains and cultivates the good instruction he has received, will more readily improve by *further* instruction; but “*whosoever hath not;*” whosoever is indifferent to instruction, and regardless whether he retains it or not; “from him shall be taken away even that he hath;” he will lose the little he may have acquired, and in punishment of his heedlessness or ingratitude, will be left in that state of ignorance in which his disposition inclines him to remain.

The blessedness, then, which our Lord pronounces upon the chosen few who faithfully adhered to him, was the reward of that disposition which led them to make a right use of the opportunities they enjoyed. They were

willing to see, and hear, and understand ; and they were “*blessed*” in so doing. They daily profited by what they saw and heard. They were confirmed in the faith ; and their diligence was amply recompensed by continual accessions of light and information from the Fountain of Truth.

But to impress his disciples with a still deeper sense of the transcendent value of the special advantages *they* enjoyed, our Lord adds, “For verily I say unto you, That many “ Prophets and righteous men have desired “ to see those things which *ye* see, and have “ not seen them ; and to hear those things “ which *ye* hear, and have not heard them.”

The Prophets and righteous men here adverted to, were those who lived under the Patriarchal and Jewish dispensations ; many of whom were Divinely inspired to foretell the coming of Christ, and the glories of his kingdom. To *Adam* the promise of the Redeemer was originally made. Righteous *Abel* testified his faith in the promise, by the Sacrifice of Atonement which he offered ; a sacrifice accepted by the Almighty with tokens of especial favour. *Enoch*, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of the judgments to be inflicted on the disobedient and impenitent at the coming of our Lord. *Noah* was a preacher

of righteousness to the same effect. *Abraham*, through the distant ages of futurity, “rejoiced “ to see the day” of our Lord ; “ and he saw “ it, and was glad.” *Moses* spake of Him as the Prophet like unto Himself, whom the Lord would raise up from among his brethren the Jewish people, and to whom they were to hearken. A continued succession of Prophets in later times more fully set forth the personal character and dignity of the Messiah and the most remarkable circumstances which were to precede or accompany his appearance. For “ to HIM gave all the prophets witness ;” and so distinctly were many of these circumstances foretold, as to prove that those “ holy “ men of God spake as they were moved by “ the Holy Ghost,” being favoured with immediate revelations from Heaven, respecting the Divine “ Author and Finisher of our “ Faith.”

But great and extraordinary as these privileges were, our Lord says to his disciples, “ many” of these “ desired to see those things “ which *ye* see, and have not seen them, and “ to hear those things which *ye* hear, and have “ not heard them.” They who lived before our Lord’s coming in the flesh had not such clear conceptions of the personal character of the Messiah, or such convincing proofs even

of their own predictions. The great scheme of man's redemption, however confidently they might rely on its accomplishment, was not presented to their view in such ample detail, was not contemplated in connection with the marvellous *events* by which it was at length effected. They took heed to the word of *Prophecy*, as "unto a light that shineth in a *dark* place, until the day should dawn, and the day-star arise^b." By this light they saw enough to assure them that "*in the fulness of time*" all these things would be accomplished. But it was natural that they should "desire," if it were possible, themselves to witness that accomplishment. The more thoroughly persuaded they might be of the certainty of what was to come to pass, the greater this desire would necessarily be. To such a state of anxious expectation, the situation of our Lord's immediate disciples presented a striking contrast. They saw his miracles; they heard his discourses; they knew the extraordinary circumstances attending his birth and ministry; they had opportunities of comparing these with what Moses and the Prophets had written concerning him: and they had the further benefit of continual

^b 2 Peter i. 19.

access to our Lord Himself for the interpretation of what he occasionally delivered respecting the great mystery of our Redemption. They were “blessed,” therefore, above the Prophets and righteous men of preceding times, in the opportunities of forming such conceptions of our Lord’s kingdom as none who lived before them could have so fully apprehended.

But the observation thus addressed by our Lord to his own disciples is not to be restricted to *their* peculiar circumstances. It extends to the obligations incurred by all who since that time have been made partakers of the Christian covenant.

Why did our Lord pronounce this blessedness upon the disciples more immediately in his presence? Not merely because such special opportunities were offered to them, but because they gladly opened their eyes to see the wonders that he wrought, and did not perversely turn from his instructions. And in this respect, all, like them, are *now* blessed, who, living under the Gospel dispensation, shew the same desire of improvement, the same teachable disposition, in matters pertaining to their salvation. The Apostles, indeed, were eye and ear-witnesses of what was done or said by their blessed Master. “That

“ which they had heard, which they had seen
“ with their eyes, which they had looked upon,
“ and their hands had handled of the Word
“ of Life^c,” declared they unto others. But unless they had had *the willing mind* to profit by these things, wherein would they have been better than the multitudes who saw and heard the same, without being converted to the Truth? On another occasion our Lord said, “ Blessed are they who have *not* seen, “ and yet have believed^d.” To whom then does *this* blessedness belong? Not surely to the blindly credulous, who care not whether they rely on truth or falsehood; but to them who “ *know* whom they have believed^e,” who are assured, that they are “ not following cunningly-devised fables,” but the faithful report of them who “ were eyewitnesses of his “ majesty^f.” Upon such only is that blessedness pronounced: and in that blessing *we* may all be partakers. We have the authentic records of what the Apostles saw and heard; and to bring us to the acceptance of the truth, nothing more is now requisite than the sincere desire to know and to do the will of God. If any, therefore, possessing these opportunities, obstinately shut the ears and close the

^c 1 John i. 1.

^e 2 Tim. i. 12.

^d John xx. 29.

^f 2 Pet. i. 16.

eyes of their understandings, to the truths that are set before them, they are nearly in the same predicament with those who rejected the *personal* ministry of our Lord and his Apostles.

If, however, it be said that our Lord's Disciples were blessed above others, not only because to them was revealed more than to any who lived *before* them, but also because they enjoyed, in their Lord's immediate presence, some *peculiar* benefits to which none in after-times could pretend; the observation, though just, will rather aggravate than extenuate the fault of those who urge it as a plea for scepticism or indifference to the truth. For, on what does *our* faith in the apostolical records depend? Is it not grounded on those very advantages which we know *they* possessed, and which consequently give to every thing they have written a stamp of indisputable authority? In proportion, therefore, to the assurance which the Apostles themselves had of the truth of what they saw and testified, is our assurance of the credibility of what they have related. And in proportion to the *extent* of knowledge communicated to *them*, is the extent of knowledge *we* derive from their writings. If the Spirit "guided *them* into all truth," it was that they might be enabled to guide *others* into the

truth. If the same Spirit “brought all things
“ to their remembrance whatsoever their Lord
“ had said unto them,” it was that those things
might be preserved and perpetuated to all suc-
ceeding generations. Accordingly, when our
Lord prayed for them, “that they might be
“ sanctified through the truth,” he added,
“ Neither pray I for these alone, but for them
“ also which shall believe on me through their
“ word; and that the *world* may know that
“ thou hast sent me, and hast loved them as
“ thou hast loved me^g.” To *us*, therefore, as
well as to *them*, it may with truth be said,
“ Many prophets and righteous men have
“ desired to see the things which ye see, and
“ have not seen them, and to hear the things
“ which ye hear, and have not heard them.”
In some respects, indeed, *we* are placed in
circumstances more favourable than even
those who lived in the time of the Apostles
themselves. The joint productions of the sa-
cred writers being placed before us, we have
it in our power to compare them with each
other. This very important advantage few, if
any, of the primitive Christians had at their
command. Our Lord himself went not be-
yond Judæa and its neighbouring districts.
The Apostles, for the most part, travelled into

^g John xvii. 17—23.

different regions, and limited their teaching each to his appointed province. A sceptic in those days might have raised a doubt, whether Paul and Peter and James preached the same doctrine; and whether Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John attested the same matters of fact. We, on the other hand, are enabled, as it were, to confront these witnesses: and by comparing what was delivered and certified by so many different persons, who had either been with our Lord from the beginning, or had had peculiar opportunities of verifying what they advanced, we can consider their testimony collectively; and are assisted in our examination of it by the light which they shed on each other's narratives and discourses.

Again; it is another circumstance eminently in our favour, that we live in times *subsequent* to the *fulfilment* of many signal *prophecies* in the New Testament, delivered by our Lord, or by the Apostles themselves, of which the men of that generation could not witness the accomplishment. Such (to say nothing of the destruction of Jerusalem) were the predictions relative to the dispersion of the Jews, the fall of Paganism, the rise and progress of the Antichristian powers, Papal and Mahometan, and other events connected with the state of the Christian Church, of

which the faithful page of history has proved itself the sure interpreter. The argument from *Prophecy*, thus continually increasing in light and strength, stands foremost among the special advantages enjoyed by Christians in these latter ages.

Of these striking peculiarities in our situation, *unbelievers* as well as *Christians* are also bound to acknowledge the force. For hence occasion is given to the most rigid scrutiny into the multiplied evidences on which our faith depends; a scrutiny, which could not but be fatal to its pretensions, if it were a system of fraud and falsehood. And has not this test been applied to it with unsparing rigour? What writings have undergone such strict investigation into their genuineness and authenticity, as those of the Sacred Canon? What historical facts have been sifted with such scrupulous and even jealous care, as those on which its whole credibility depends? While therefore they who gladly receive the Word have abundant reason to be thankful for the corroboration thus given to their faith, the adversary cannot but confess that an opportunity is freely afforded him of assailing it wherever he may deem it to be most vulnerable.

Our Lord's observation, then, is applicable,

in a certain degree, not only to believers at that period, but to those in *after*-times. Christians in general of the apostolic age, had undoubtedly a much more ample and perfect knowledge of evangelical truth, than the greatest of their *predecessors*. Christians in these latter times have the full benefit of the light communicated to *them*, together with that *additional* light which the *verification of their predictions*, and the *collective force of their testimony* have supplied. The comparative benefits in each case necessarily result from the *growing* evidence which time and the course of events afford to the truth of Revealed Religion.

This view of the subject will also lead us to a right interpretation of another remarkable declaration of our Blessed Lord; in which, after representing John the Baptist to be “more than a Prophet,” and that “among them that are born of women there had not risen a greater than John,” he adds, “notwithstanding, he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he^b.” As the immediate precursor of his Lord, John had evidently an office and mission greatly superior to any of the Prophets of the Old Testament: and it is equally evident from

^b Matt. xi. 11.

his discourses, as well as from the testimony of our Saviour, that he had more enlarged and distinct views of the nature of the Christian dispensation, than any of his predecessors. But of “the kingdom of heaven” (the establishment of our Lord’s spiritual kingdom upon earth) he could speak only as being then “*at hand*,” not as actually formed and completed. Even down to the period of his death, he saw it but in its incipient state; in advancement towards completion, but not yet extended or consolidated by the events which were necessarily to take place before “*old things could pass away, and all things be come new*ⁱ.” In this respect, therefore, the least among those who were to be called to the sacred office of the ministry, *after* that kingdom was established; (after the evangelical covenant had been sealed and ratified by the death of the Redeemer, and attested by the glorious events which followed it;) would be invested with more enlarged powers, and more thoroughly instructed in the great mystery of man’s redemption, than even the Baptist himself. Nor does this apply only to the *preachers* of the Christian dispensation, but even to the lowliest of its hearers. The least among the members of Christ’s spi-

ⁱ 2 Cor. v. 17.

ritual body, who are now duly instructed in the essential truths of the Gospel, may attain to a more full and distinct knowledge of its design, and more abundant proof of its Divine truth, than the most enlightened of those holy men whom God raised up, in antecedent dispensations, gradually to disclose his gracious purpose. For, may not the lowliest disciple of Christ in the present day, know that his Saviour lived and died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven, for the salvation of men; that he wrought miracles and fulfilled prophecies; that he “spake as never man “spake;” that “his word was with power,” such power as his adversaries were never able to resist; that he “went about doing good;” that by these and numberless other circumstances it was proved that he was indeed the Son of God, and that whosoever believeth in Him, and heareth his sayings and doeth them, “shall not perish, but have everlasting life?” And does not this short compendium of Scripture-doctrine contain, not only the substance of every thing which the Law and the Prophets had revealed, but doctrines which to *them* were never so completely unfolded; and also facts, in confirmation of them, unknown under the dispensation of the Law and the Prophets?

But, vast as this accession of evidence to the truth of Christianity appears to be, in comparison with that of preceding dispensations of revealed religion, it will serve still more to heighten our sense of its value and importance, if we view it in contrast with the slender portion of light, or rather the state of darkness, which once overspread the *Gentile* world.

It can hardly be necessary to enter into a detail of the acknowledged wants and exigencies of the wisest among the heathen sages, respecting the subjects most interesting to the mind of man, and most necessary to guide him to truth or happiness. It is sufficient to observe, that it was not so much from defective *reasoning* on these subjects, (for when has the world seen greater masters in the art of reasoning, than some among them who devoted themselves to these researches?) nor from *indifference* to the truths concerning them, (for who have shewn greater diligence and anxiety to penetrate through the obscurity which surrounded them?) but it was, generally, from the want of any certain information respecting those facts, and those fundamental principles of religion, which revelation only has made known, that the heathen philosophers failed in their inquiries after truth. The eyes of their

mind were open to see wisdom, and their ears to hear its communications ; but the light of nature shone too dimly to irradiate their understandings, and the voice of nature was too feeble or inarticulate to convey to them distinct perceptions. Complaints to this effect not unfrequently occur in the writings of these illustrious and virtuous men ; complaints, indeed, sometimes intermingled with a display of intellectual pride ill-befitting the condition they deplore, yet such as cannot but awaken sympathy and respect, when accompanied, as occasionally they are found to be, with expressions of great solicitude for further instruction from the Source of light and perfection. Of such men it might well be said, that “ they *desired* to see the things which “ we see, and did not see them, and to hear “ the things which we hear, and did not hear “ them.” Nor can we doubt that many among them would have gladly welcomed “ the day- “ spring from on high which hath visited us, “ to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Like the blind man restored to sight, who, when our Lord said to him, “ Dost thou be- “ lieve on the Son of God,” eagerly replied, “ Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on “ him ^k ?”—we cannot doubt that many a

^k John ix. 35, 36.

mighty master of the heathen schools would have bowed the knee with gratitude to his heavenly Benefactor, and have testified his ardent desire to be guided by “that Light” which lighteth every man that cometh into “the world¹.”

Here, then, is a subject which may well awaken in ourselves sentiments of devout gratitude towards God, and of zeal to promote the purpose for which these blessings have been conferred. “Behold,” says St. John, “what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called “*the sons of God*^m!” Through the Christian dispensation, we are become the adopted children of our heavenly Father, endowed with special privileges, and made heirs of eternal life. These blessings too are dispensed, as far as the divine Author of them is concerned, “without respect of persons,” confined to no age or country, restricted to no condition of life, limited by no considerations but such as the most perfect equity must approve, and such as shall hereafter fully justify the ways of God to man. A just sense of the value of these blessings will naturally lead to a consideration of the best means of testifying our gratitude for them, and rendering them effec-

¹ John i. 9.

^m 1 John iii. 2.

tual. It will operate as a continual warning of the danger of “neglecting so great salvationⁿ,” of either swerving from the faith itself, or “holding the truth in unrighteousness.” It will admonish us of the necessity of “giving all diligence to make our calling and election sure^o,” by the awful suggestion, “If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and sinner appear^p?”

But our duty ends not here. A regard to our own personal interest in this merciful dispensation will dispose us, when we have imbibed the true spirit of the Christian character, to extend to *others* the full measure of these benefits, and to give glory to God by doing good to *man*. “*Knowledge*,” when applied to no other purpose than that of self-gratification, “*puffeth up*” its possessors; it elevates them, in their own estimation, above their fellows; and in themselves its whole use and value terminate. But “*Charity*,” that active charity by which knowledge is diffused for the general good, “*edifieth*^q.” It helps to build up others in the faith. It enlarges the circle of Christ’s household. It adds new members to the Church. It confirms and strengthens those who already belong to it:

ⁿ Heb. ii. 3.

^p 1 Peter iv. 18.

^o Rom. i. 18.

^q 1 Cor. viii. 1.

and thus carries on the main design of the Gospel itself. The great end, for which the Apostles were permitted to see and hear what those before them had neither seen nor heard, was, that they might be instruments in turning others from darkness to light. The same end is still intended by the Almighty in the continuance of the Church. Christians are still to be “the light of the world;” “a city set on a hill that cannot be hid;” “the salt of the earth,” which, “if it have lost its savour, is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men^r.”

But whatever may be the zeal and activity of the members of the Christian Church, in thus endeavouring to enlarge the extent of our Lord’s kingdom here on earth, ever let it be remembered, that the most convincing testimony we can give of our sincere devotion to the cause in which we are engaged, will be its *practical* influence upon ourselves. Neither the Apostles, nor the converts whom they made, were encouraged to expect a blessing upon a barren, unprofitable faith. “If ye *know* these things,” said our Lord to his Disciples, “happy are ye if ye *do* them^s :” and “herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear

^r Matt. v. 13, 14.

^s John xiii. 17.

“ *much fruit* ; so shall ye be my disciples^t.” To the *Gentiles* the Apostle says, “ Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye *light* in the Lord ; walk as children of light^v ;” and contrasting *their* situation, as *converts* to Christianity, with that of the unbelieving *Jews*, he elsewhere charges them “ not to be high-minded, but to fear^w.” What stronger language could be used, to shew the weight of responsibility which every Christian takes upon him by his profession, and the reproach brought on those who disgrace it by their misconduct or neglect ?

Let us look around, then, and see how far any such reproach may deservedly be fixed upon the Christian world in its present state ; and for what portion of it *we ourselves* may individually be answerable. Our Lord warned the impenitent and unbelieving *Jews*, that “ many should come from the East and West, “ and should sit down with Abraham, and “ Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven, “ but the children of the kingdom,” the *Jews* themselves, “ should be cast out^x.” An Apostle has also admonished *Christian* believers, that “ it had been better for them not to “ have *known* the way of righteousness, than

^t John xv. 8.

^w Rom. xi. 20.

^v Ephes. v. 8.

^x Matt. viii. 11, 12.

“after they have known it to turn from the
“holy commandment delivered unto them.”
These are awful denunciations. The former
has been long since verified in the temporal
calamities of the Jewish people. The latter
remains still to be executed in the final judg-
ments of the Almighty. In both we are
taught *this* instructive lesson, that even the
case of the unenlightened *Heathen* may even-
tually be less desperate than that of the care-
less and ungrateful *Christian*. “HE THAT
“HATH EARS TO HEAR, LET HIM HEAR!”

y 2 Peter ii. 21.

SERMON IV.

MATTHEW iv. 1.

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the Devil.

AMONG the wonderful instances of humiliation to which our blessed Saviour vouchsafed to submit, in the great work of our redemption, his temptation in the wilderness is one of the most extraordinary and the most mysterious. It forms, however, a most important link in that chain of evidence by which his pretensions were confirmed and verified; and in no instance, perhaps, did he more signally prove himself to be “the Captain of our salvation^a.” Whatever difficulties, therefore, may present themselves, we are encouraged to approach the subject with confidence, though not without that reverential caution which befits us in the investigation of any matter so far removed from our own personal obser-

^a Heb. ii. 10.

vation and experience. The time, the occasion, the circumstances, and the purpose which seems to have been intended by it, combine to give an interest to the inquiry, and to connect it intimately both with our faith and practice.

The occurrence, it appears, took place immediately after our Lord's baptism. "*Then*," says St. Matthew, "was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the Devil." At his baptism, a voice from heaven, accompanied with the visible descent of the Holy Spirit, declared him to be "the beloved Son" of God. Thus was he solemnly ordained to the office and ministry he came to fulfil; and the time now approached when he was to open his commission to the world, and enter upon the great work his heavenly Father had given him to perform; when he was to go forth also gifted with those miraculous powers, which should establish his claims to be received as the Saviour of mankind. "Being full of the Holy Ghost," says St. Luke, "he returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit"—the Holy Spirit which had just descended upon him—"into the wilderness^b." Thither, no doubt, he went, to prepare himself by prayer and meditation, by seclusion

^b Luke iv. 1.

and abstinence, for a work infinitely surpassing, in difficulty and importance, all that could be conceived or executed by human powers.

The period of forty days, during which our Lord abode in this place of solitude, we may conceive to have been designed for the accomplishment of the types in the persons of Moses and Elijah. Moses, the giver of the Jewish Law, “abode in the mount forty days “ and forty nights, and did neither eat bread “ nor drink water^c.” Elijah, the chief of the Prophets under the same dispensation, “went “ in the strength of the meat that he had “ eaten forty days and forty nights unto Ho- “ reb the mount of God^d.” These were acts of humiliation, the former for the sins of the people in the wilderness, the latter for similar offences under their idolatrous kings. Our Lord, who came to be an expiation for the sins of the whole world, vouchsafed to submit to a similar act of humiliation. In the former instances, as in this, the support must have been *miraculous* : and in each case a sure testimony was given of Divine authority imparted to the individuals so distinguished. But Moses and Elijah, while thus upholden by the manifest sanction of the Almighty, were also thus marked out as precursors and figurative

^c Deut. ix. 9.

^d 1 Kings xix. 8.

representatives of HIM in whom the Law and the Prophets were to be fulfilled. They were also permitted afterwards to behold Him here on earth, in the glory of His transfiguration, and to hold converse with Him on the actual accomplishment of those things which before had been revealed to them only in type and in figure.

It was during this important work of preparation and self-discipline, that our Lord was assailed by the tempter. This evil spirit, constantly represented in Scripture as the great adversary of mankind, having from the beginning been the immediate cause of the fall and degradation of our first parents, persevered with unceasing malice in endeavouring to complete the overthrow of their posterity. As chief of other fallen and accursed spirits, he is described as “going about, seeking whom he may devour:” and however inconceivable to us may be the means which such a being can employ of working evil to the whole human race; yet the word of God so repeatedly states, that to a certain extent he is permitted to exercise this power, that the fact is not to be disputed. The original grounds of this hostility to mankind and to their Redeemer, the Scriptures have not distinctly revealed. That it was the result of

despair of his own condition, and of envy in contemplating the happiness first prepared for man in his state of innocence, and afterwards renewed to him through a propitiation for sin, has been inferred from his being represented as the Deceiver and the Accuser of mankind, the Instigator and the Perpetrator of evil, the Tempter to sin, and the Tormentor to inflict its punishment. Nor can the probability of this be set aside by anything the scoffer may allege as to its militating against the moral attributes of the Supreme Being. That man should have been created subject to trial, from within and from without; and that after he had fallen from his integrity such trials should still be permitted, implies nothing repugnant to the Divine perfections, supposing, in each case, sufficient ability to have been given him to withstand temptation. And of this the Scriptures fully assure us. Neither in his state of innocence, nor in his fallen state, was man ever “tempted above that he was able to bear.” In the former state, besides the natural, though limited perfection of his moral endowments, it is probable that the help of Divine grace was at hand to enable him to resist evil. In the latter case, we know that it is so; it being one especial purpose of the Gospel dispen-

sation to entitle him to this aid, through faith in the Saviour that purchased it for him, and thus to enable him to “become more than “conqueror^e.”

What degree of knowledge the evil spirit might have of the mystery of man’s redemption, or even of the personal dignity and office of the Redeemer himself; whether he knew that he was to die for the sins of mankind, or that he united in himself the divine with the human nature; are questions which the Scriptures do not enable us to determine; and concerning which it is as unnecessary as it is fruitless to inquire. That his own purpose in working the fall of man would be ultimately frustrated, and that the Divine purpose of opening a way to man’s restoration to eternal life would be accomplished by some one invested with human nature, were points which seem to have been revealed to the tempter himself, in the sentence passed upon him on that fatal occasion;—“I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel^f.” The latter part of the prediction apprised him that in this conflict he would not be wholly restrained from inflicting evil. He would

^e Rom. viii. 37.

^f Gen. iii. 15.

“bruise the heel” of the promised seed; an expression, however dark and mysterious, implying that evil of *some* kind he would still have the power to execute upon the objects of his malice, whether by his own immediate agency in league with other spirits like himself, or by the wicked among the human race disposed to yield to his malignant influence. It seems also, that this subtle adversary was not ignorant that the time was arrived when the coming of the Saviour should take place, that our Lord was the person about to assume that character, and that he was indued with power from on high to sustain it. Such an undertaking and such a purpose could not but awaken his hatred and his fears. Having succeeded in seducing the *first* Adam from his duty, it may well be supposed that the utmost venom of his malicious ingenuity would be directed towards Christ, the *second* Adam, who was to retrieve the consequences of the Fall. *Now*, he might imagine, was the important moment, when a single failure in obedience or integrity would blast the hopes of man, and frustrate his deliverance from guilt and misery.

Nor is it any impeachment of the Divine wisdom or goodness, that the Redeemer should be subjected to such a trial. His as-

sumption of human nature rendered him liable to every temptation incidental to that nature. “Verily,” says the Apostle to the Hebrews, “he took not on him the nature of angels, but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered, being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted^g.” Since he was to be made perfect through sufferings^h,” and thereby become a “sacrifice for sin,” this trial of his constancy appears to have been permitted, lest any thing should be wanting to the completion of his victory over the great enemy of mankind. His temptation therefore, (as well as his incarnation and nativity, his circumcision and baptism, his fasting and his agony, his cross and passion,) is to be reckoned among the circumstances by which he got the dominion over sin and death, and bruised the serpent’s head.

But besides these considerations, which sufficiently obviate any doubts or cavils as to the credibility or the expediency of this part

^g Heb. ii. 16, 17, 18.

^h Hebr. ii. 10.

of our blessed Saviour's history, there are other points deserving of our attention, as tending still further to elucidate its purpose and effect.

In the several temptations by which our Lord was on this occasion assailed, may be observed a manifest resemblance to those trials which he afterwards had to encounter in the exercise of his ministry. This is especially deserving of consideration, since it exhibits the whole transaction, not only as an immediate test of our Lord's unimpeachable conduct and unconquerable resolution, but also as forewarning and fore-arming him, in his human character, for those particular temptations to which he would be most exposed.

The first artifice of the tempter was intended to betray him into a mistrust of Providence. During his abode in the wilderness, and an abstinence of forty days and forty nights, our Lord's support was altogether miraculous. 'This preternatural support being withdrawn, "he was afterwards an "hungred." The tempter seized on this crisis, to endeavour to seduce him from his trust in God; insinuating that a fit occasion now presented itself of proving that he was really the person he assumed to be;—"If

“ thou be the Son of God, command that these
“ stones be made bread.”

He who afterwards fed a multitude of five thousand by the power of his word, we might conceive to have had power, on this occasion, to supply his own wants by a similar exercise of the Divine energy within him. But where was the motive to warrant him in a compliance with this requisition? Could it be supposed that the same Almighty Being who had hitherto so marvellously upholden him, and to accomplish whose will he came into the world, would now forsake him and suffer him to perish? Or was a miracle to be wrought at the bidding of an insidious adversary, for ostentation only, and with no purpose conducive either to the glory of God or the good of mankind? By no such motive could a mind of spotless purity and sanctity be actuated. Instantly our Lord rejected the proposal; and to leave no pretence even for bringing it into discussion, he grounds his refusal on the authority of the word of God; reminding the tempter of the miraculous supply of the Israelites in the wilderness, when God rained manna on the ground for food, instead of bread, and when Moses, to keep them steadfast in their faith towards God, warned them that “ man doth not live by bread only, but

“by every word that proceedeth out of the
“mouth of Godⁱ.” By thus placing also his
own authority in comparison with that of
Moses, he might be understood to intimate
that no want of power restrained him from
working this miracle, but a full and perfect
confidence in the same Divine support and
superintendence which accompanied the peo-
ple of God under their inspired Lawgiver and
Guide.

With his conduct on this occasion our
Lord's subsequent demeanour throughout
the course of his ministry entirely corre-
sponded. He suffered every inconvenience
of hunger and thirst, of pain and persecu-
tion, without a single act (as far as we know)
of divine power to remove them. In the
last scene of his life he refrained from call-
ing in supernatural aid. “Thinkest thou,”
says he, “that I cannot now pray to the
“Father, and he shall presently give me
“more than twelve legions of angels? But
“how then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled,
“that thus it must be^k?” He abstained also
from working miracles for the vain purpose
of gratifying those who obstinately resisted
the proofs of his divine mission. Herod
“hoped to have seen some miracle done by

ⁱ Deut. viii. 3.

^k Matth. xxvi. 53.

“him^l,” but his insidious curiosity was disregarded. Of one region also where he abode, it is said that “he could do no miracle “there^m,”—that is, he deemed it unworthy of him to do so,—“because of their unbelief.”

Baffled, therefore, in this first assault, the tempter has recourse to a proposal of an opposite kind. “He taketh him up into the “holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of “the temple.” From that prodigious eminence he urges him to “cast himself down;” reciting a memorable passage from the book of Psalms, “He shall give his angels charge “concerning thee, and in their hands they “shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou “dash thy foot against a stoneⁿ.”

It gives additional force to this temptation, that the Jews were then in general expectation of the Messiah, and imagined that he would suddenly come to the temple, and there manifest himself in some signal manner. The temple being also in the most frequented part of the city, such a display of miraculous power might have strongly excited the astonishment of the Jews, and have prevailed with many to acknowledge him as

^l Luke xxiii. 8.

^m Matth. xiii. 58. and Mark vi. 5.

ⁿ Psalm xci. 12.

the Son of God. This may account for the daring singularity of the proposal. But it was not thus that our Lord would open his commission to the world. It was not by a vain and unnecessary display of his miraculous endowments that he was to seek proselytes among the multitude; but by a series of beneficent acts of power, to obtain the affections, as well as to convince the understandings, of rational and considerate observers. Neither did it become him to be instrumental by his example to the encouragement of a presumptuous reliance upon the Divine protection, when there existed no necessity for exposing himself to danger. To have wrought a merely vainglorious miracle, would ill have accorded with the character of him who was to be “meek and lowly in heart,” and who “sought not his own glory, but His that sent him^o.” To make thus a transitory impression upon thoughtless minds, would but have given false views of his design in coming into the world, and unworthy conceptions of his character and office.

The same humility and entire deference to the will of his heavenly Father were after-

^o John vii. 18.

wards conspicuous in his whole deportment. When the Pharisees demanded of him a *sign from heaven*, (expecting probably some such display as the tempter here suggested,) he refused to comply with their demands, and referred them to a sign which was not to be fulfilled till after he had been put to death^p. Far from affecting popularity and worldly applause, he in several instances charged those on whom he had wrought a miracle, not to blaze it abroad. No miracle, indeed, appears to have been wrought by him for the sole purpose of evincing his *power* to work it. To establish some important truth connected with the immediate object of his mission, or to render some actual benefit to the souls or bodies of men, was the manifest intent of all that he said or did. And though his power of working miracles appears to have been “without measure^q,” yet was it exercised with the utmost submission to the Divine will, nor did he seek to hasten the accomplishment of his purpose by any premature anticipation of the times or seasons which “the Father “had put in his own power^r.” He gradually communicated to his followers, as they were “able to bear them,” truths which they were afterwards to promulgate; not dazzling

^p Mark viii. 12.^q John iii. 34.^r Acts i. 7.

or overpowering their faculties by the outward splendour of his deeds, but availing himself of such occasions as presented themselves in the ordinary course of his ministry, to blend with his wonderful works the most instructive lessons of piety and virtue.

The last effort of the tempter was more shameless and undisguised. No longer affecting to treat him with reverence as the *Son of God*, he assails him as the *Son of Man*, vulnerable (as he presumed) in those points where human nature is most prone to yield, accessible to those prospects of ambition and grandeur which oftentimes prove too powerful for minds incapable of being wrought upon by baser objects. “He taketh him up
“ into an exceeding high mountain, and shew-
“ eth him all the kingdoms of the world, and
“ the glory of them ; and saith unto him,
“ All these things will I give thee, if thou
“ wilt fall down and worship me.”

It is not necessary to the literal interpretation of this part of the narrative, to suppose that preternatural means were used to present to the outward eye these scenes of worldly greatness ; unless we infer it from St. Luke’s expression, that he “ shewed unto
“ him all the kingdoms of the world *in a mo-*

“ment of time^s.” But it is sufficient to understand by this expression, that a glowing description of these scenes was given by the tempter, accompanied with such delusive pretences of his own power to confer the imaginary blessings, as might operate most readily on an unsuspecting mind. For, only to *human* passions could such motives be addressed; and it is evident that the tempter believed Jesus to be neither infallible nor impeccable. The proposal was also in full accordance with the known expectations of the Jewish people, who looked for the establishment of dominion over other nations. They were prepared to enlist under any leader in such an enterprise. They even conceived it to have been prophetically announced as the great purpose of the Messiah's coming, and waited to be led on by him to universal conquest. Humanly speaking, indeed, great were the temptations to be encountered by our Saviour in this respect; and he had power at command to effect whatever he might take in hand. But however captivating these views might be, had he yielded to them, the great end for which he lived and died would have remained unaccom-

^s Luke iv. 5.

plished, and the power of Satan have still enslaved the world. The triumph would have been not his own, but that of his insidious foe, the deceiver of mankind. With holy indignation, therefore, he spurns at the tempter's offer, and with an authoritative rebuke drives him from his presence :—"Get thee hence, Satan ;
 " for it is written, Thou shalt worship the
 " Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou
 " serve."

Such was the result of these daring efforts of the adversary to frustrate the merciful dispensation of the Almighty for the redemption of mankind. He commenced the attack before our Lord publicly entered on his ministry. "And when he had ended all the temptations," says St. Luke, "he departed from him for a season^t." No further *personal* trials of this kind are expressly recorded. But that he instigated the Jews to take away the life of Jesus, and to inflict upon him the most bitter sufferings, we may gather from our Lord's emphatical saying to his cruel persecutors, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness^v." Yet in these very circumstances, how marvelously was the original sentence upon the evil one fulfilled ! The serpent bruised the heel of the Messiah, the seed of the woman ; but in

^t Luke iv. 13.

^v Luke xxii. 53.

that same event the seed of the woman bruised the serpent's head. For by His death He destroyed "him that had the power of death, " that is, the Devil^w."

But what is the practical improvement which we ourselves may derive from meditating on this memorable conflict between the destroyer and the Saviour of mankind?

1. First, it admonishes us not to expect that we can pass through our Christian warfare without temptations from the same hostile quarter. "The disciple is not above his Master, nor the servant above his Lord." If our Lord endured such trials, so must we. And "blessed is the man that endureth them ; " for when he is tried, he shall receive the " crown of life which the Lord hath promised " to them that love him^x." It is no mark of God's displeasure, that he suffers such things to befall us, since he spared not from them even his beloved Son, "in whom he was well " pleased." This let every Christian bear in mind ; nor think it " a strange thing^y" when these trials occur. Let him expect them, prepare for them, and look for help and strength to Him who is " mighty to save."

2. Secondly, this narrative tends to assure us that the tempter is not irresistible. It af-

^w Hebr. ii. 14.

^x James i. 12.

^y 1 Peter iv. 12.

fords an edifying and an encouraging comment on the exhortation, “Resist the Devil, “and he will flee from you.” It was in his *human* nature that our Lord underwent these trials; and since in that nature he was susceptible of all its feelings, its troubles, and its dangers, his example is so far applicable to ourselves. Be it also remembered, that although the Almighty permits such trials of our faith and patience, he is in no respect the author of sin. Therefore, “let no man say, when “he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for “God cannot be tempted with evil, neither “tempteth he any man: but every man is “tempted, when he is drawn away of his “own lust, and enticed^z.” With every temptation there is a way to escape, “that we may “be able to bear it^a.”

3. Another consolation is derived from this portion of our Lord’s history, that he who thus experimentally felt the power of temptation will hereafter come to be our Judge. This office devolves on him who partook of the infirmities incidental to our condition, and knows the dangers and difficulties to which we are exposed. “We have not,” says the Apostle, “an High Priest who cannot be “touched with the feeling of our infirmities;

^z James i. 13, 14.

^a 1 Cor. x. 13.

“but was in all points tempted like as we
“are, yet without sin:” and “therefore,” he
adds, “let us come boldly unto the throne
“of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and
“find grace to help in time of need^b.” It
is impossible to place the subject in a more
affecting point of view.

4. Lastly, we are taught by our Lord’s
conduct in this scene of trial, *how* we are to
withstand the tempter. Our Lord repelled
his solicitations by the power of that Sacred
Word, which, to use St. Paul’s expression, “is
“quick and powerful, and sharper than any
“two-edged sword.” *This* too is the instru-
ment with which *we* must combat the as-
saults of wicked spirits, wicked men, and our
own corrupt inclinations. The word of God
is a Christian’s armour. When tempted to
do amiss, the immediate application of the
commands or prohibitions of Holy Writ will
not fail to recall him to a sense of duty. But
the decision must be prompt and unhesitat-
ing. How striking, in this respect, was the
contrast between our Lord’s conduct and that
of our first parents! The *first* Adam yielded,
and fell; the *last* Adam resisted, and triumph-
ed. Jesus listened to no persuasions; he
cited the plain commands of God, and the

^b Hebr. iv. 15, 16.

deceiver had nought to reply. Our first parents might have done the same; since *they* too had an express command from the Almighty, with an express penalty annexed to the violation of it. Yet they hearkened to the tempter. They were willing to hear *reasons* for slighting God's own declarations, and became an easy prey to him who lay in wait to deceive.

Let this be a warning to every one who is willing to "hold fast his integrity." Various are the sins that beset us; various the seducers who would ensnare us into evil. But our blessed Master hath shewn us how to escape them. By prayer, by meditation, by a diligent use of the means of grace vouchsafed to us, we are to arm ourselves for the conflict. Nor need we doubt the issue. "Greater is he that is in us, than he that is in the world^c." We can "do all things through Christ which strengtheneth us^d." HE hath trod the path of temptation in his way to glory; and HE it is who hath assured us by his beloved Apostle, that "this is the victory which overcometh the world, even our FAITH^e."

^c 1 John iv. 4.

^d Phil. iv. 13.

^e 1 John v. 4.

SERMON V.

MARK ix. 2.

And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John, and leadeth them into an high mountain apart by themselves, and he was transfigured before them.

EVERY one conversant with our Lord's history must have observed in it the remarkable intermixture of occurrences which indicate the preeminent dignity of his character, with those of lowliness and humiliation which marked the general tenor of his condition here on earth. Although that history continually verifies the prediction that he was to be "despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," yet are there incidents in it which break through these clouds of darkness with a lustre that almost overwhelms us by its more than earthly splendour. Around some of these, however, there is cast a veil of mystery, which, though

it detracts not from the credibility of the narrative, compels us to approach it with awful reverence; exhibiting the Person who is the subject of the narrative as of a character and condition far above other human beings, and invested with an office and mission which no human being but himself could ever have executed or conceived.

Among incidents of this description are those especially, in which the union of the divine with the human nature in his person, and his manifestation as the promised Redeemer of mankind, were most distinctly evidenced. The song of the heavenly host at his nativity, the voice from heaven at his baptism, the ministry of angels after his temptation in the wilderness, the voice which again glorified him towards the close of his ministry, the heavenly messenger that strengthened him during the awful scene in the garden of Gethsemane, and the fearful signs and wonders at his crucifixion;—all bore testimony to the great mystery of his incarnation. They shewed the Son of God enduring and suffering as man, yet ministered unto by the highest inhabitants of heaven, and proclaimed even by the eternal Father to be One with Himself in majesty and honour. Into this inscrutable mystery it

is in vain for us to inquire further than is necessary for the confirmation of our faith. In the execution of the great work he had undertaken, means were to be employed, and purposes to be accomplished, the expediency or necessity of which may never, perhaps, be fully known or appreciated, by any but that infinite wisdom which ordained them from the beginning of the world.

Yet, notwithstanding the degree of obscurity which may involve some of these portions of our Lord's history, there are none, of which we cannot in some measure trace the design, and the improvement also to be derived from them. There are none which may not be made instrumental to the increase of our faith, and the strengthening of our hope. However sublime and awful in their circumstances, they were "written for our learning;"—written, "that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we might have life through his name ^a."

Our Lord's transfiguration is one of those memorable occurrences to which these observations are applicable. It was an occurrence singular in its kind, mysterious in its charac-

^a John xx. 31.

ter, and its purpose no where distinctly unfolded. Being, however, circumstantially narrated by three of the Evangelists, and adverted to in the Epistles both of St. John and St. Peter, it was doubtless important in the estimation of the sacred writers; nor can it be either an unworthy or a presumptuous endeavour on our part, to search for such elucidation of its intent, both with regard to the Apostles themselves and to all succeeding generations of believers, as may be gathered from the transaction itself, from the circumstances by which it was preceded and followed, or from its apparent tendency to illustrate the nature and character of the Christian dispensation.

The Evangelists concur in stating that this extraordinary event took place within a few days after a remarkable conversation between our Lord and the Apostles. “Jesus asked
“his disciples, Whom do men say that I am?
“And they answered, John the Baptist: but
“some say, Elias, and others, one of the Prophets. And he saith unto them, But whom
“say ye that I am? And Peter answereth
“and saith unto him, Thou art the CHRIST.
“And he charged them that they should tell
“no man of him. And he began to teach
“them, that the Son of Man must suffer

“ many things, and be rejected of the Elders,
 “ and of the chief Priests, and Scribes, and be
 “ killed, and after three days rise again. And
 “ he spake that saying openly. And Peter
 “ took him, and began to rebuke him. But
 “ when he had turned and looked on his dis-
 “ ciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, Get thee
 “ behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not
 “ the things that be of God, but the things
 “ that be of men. And when he had called
 “ the people unto him, with his disciples also,
 “ He said unto them, Whosoever will come
 “ after me, let him deny himself, and take up
 “ his cross, and follow me. For whosoever
 “ will save his life shall lose it; but who-
 “ soever shall lose his life for my sake and
 “ the Gospel’s, the same shall save it. For
 “ what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain
 “ the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or
 “ what shall a man give in exchange for
 “ his soul? Whosoever, therefore, shall be
 “ ashamed of me and of my words in this
 “ adulterous and sinful generation, of him
 “ also shall the Son of Man be ashamed,
 “ when he cometh in the glory of his Fa-
 “ ther with the holy angels. And he said
 “ unto them, Verily, I say unto you, that
 “ there be some of them that stand here,
 “ which shall not taste of death, till they

“ have seen the kingdom of God come with
“ power^b. ”

In this conversation we are made acquainted with the views the disciples had taken of our Lord's personal character and office. We discover the prejudices which rendered those views indistinct, and in some respects erroneous. We see also the gracious endeavour of their heavenly Master gradually to remove these prejudices, and to prepare them for the reception of truths which they could not yet contemplate with a steadfast eye.

Although this was at an advanced period of his ministry, it does not appear that our Lord had hitherto expressly foretold his *sufferings*. The Apostles had witnessed so many of his wonderful deeds, and had heard so many of his wonderful discourses, that they were evidently impressed with a thorough conviction that he was “ that Prophet “ that should come into the world ; ” the great Deliverer foretold by Moses and the Prophets. To the question, therefore, “ Whom “ say *ye* that I am ? ” the answer was returned with undoubting confidence, “ Thou “ art the CHRIST.” But they were little aware, that in making this confession they virtually

^b Mark viii. 27—38. and ix. 1.

pledged themselves to faith in a *suffering* Messiah, in a *crucified* Redeemer, in One who “must suffer many things, and be rejected and killed.” Their thoughts were bent upon a triumphant chief, overpowering all opposition, and leading captive every enemy to his pretensions. How this was to be effected by his humiliation and death, was the hardest lesson they had yet to learn. Yet no lesson was so necessary to the purpose for which they were called to be his disciples, none so indispensable even to the confirmation of their faith in him, when once their understandings should be opened to perceive that “thus it was written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer^c.” Our Lord, therefore, seizes the opportunity of their confessing him as the Christ, to begin teaching them this painful truth; and severe was the rebuke which Peter received for taking offence at it. Nor was the subject dismissed without an affecting admonition to the surrounding hearers, as well as to the chosen disciples, on the necessity of being prepared to follow him, and manfully to own him for their Saviour, notwithstanding these discouragements, and even under the prospect of losing their own lives, for his sake and the Gospel’s.

^c Luke xxiv. 46.

We may well conceive the effect of so repulsive a stroke upon the minds of men hitherto elate with expectations of worldly preeminence. But no sooner was this mistaken ardour repressed, than expectations, nay, assurances of an higher kind were forthwith imparted. “ Verily, I say unto you, “ that there be some of them that stand here, “ which shall not taste of death, till they “ have seen the kingdom of God come with “ power.” Here was a promise that, at no very distant period, occasion should be given of joy and triumph, such as should satisfy them that not even the most splendid predictions of him had been unfulfilled. In what acceptation the disciples themselves then understood this assurance is not recorded. It seems, however, thenceforth to have prevented any unbecoming expressions of distrust or doubt as to the necessity or expediency of his sufferings, whenever our Lord again adverted to the subject. And we may conceive that the predictions of his resurrection, which usually accompanied these warnings of his death and suffering, contributed still to uphold them in some ulterior views of his temporal kingdom.

Bearing in mind these several circumstances, we may now more confidently pro-

ceed to a consideration of that particular event which is the subject of our present inquiry.

That the transfiguration was such an actual change in the person of our Lord as the Evangelists describe, and not a mere vision, or any illusion of the senses, the reverence due to the sacred writers, and the whole tenor of the narrative, forbid us to question. Overpowered as the disciples acknowledge themselves to have been by surprise, admiration, and fear, there seems no room for their *imagination*s to have operated in producing the effect described; nor can it be supposed that our Lord would have suffered them to continue under false impressions of what occurred, had they been misled by the suddenness or vehemence of their emotions. The change, therefore, in our Lord's appearance, however inconceivable to our apprehensions, was doubtless a *real* change, such as might be ascertained by the evidence of the senses, and leaving no room for doubt in the minds of the spectators, as to what they "heard, and "saw with their eyes, and looked upon, of the "Word of life^d."

The appearances of Moses and Elias were susceptible also of the same kind of proof, and

^d 1 John i. 1.

are spoken of by the Evangelists with the same unhesitating confidence. And though neither of these illustrious persons could have been before known to the disciples, yet the conversation that passed between our Lord and them was sufficient to secure them in this respect from the possibility of error; our Lord himself thus virtually certifying the identity of the persons miraculously brought into his presence. The whole transaction, indeed, is so far above human invention, and so far removed from any conceptions the Apostles *then* entertained of the truths it unfolded to them, that nothing less than the irresistible conviction of their own senses, and the testimony of their Lord himself, can be supposed to have operated to their belief in the reality of the scene. And it is in the very circumstance of its being thus adapted to the removal of their previous misconceptions, that we are enabled to discern its probable and most obvious design.

The disciples, although they had confessed Jesus to be the Christ, do not yet appear to have had distinct apprehensions either of his dignity as the Son of God, or of his humiliation as the Son of Man; nor do they seem to have been aware, that by the accomplishment of the Law and the Prophets in his

person, the whole Jewish dispensation was about to be superseded, and to give place to the universal promulgation of the Gospel. Their misapprehension of the former points was shewn in the conversation that had recently taken place. Their prepossessions respecting the latter appeared on every occasion, and were not entirely removed until a much later period. How far this marvellous event was calculated to dispel these prejudices, is the point that especially claims our consideration.

Moses and Elias were evidently on this occasion representatives of the Law and the Prophets; and their re-appearance from the world of spirits, to hold this conference with HIM to whom the Law and the Prophets had given witness, was an indication of the harmony and connection of the Gospel with the preceding dispensations. Both these distinguished persons had been eminently faithful servants of God, and instruments of promoting his truth upon earth. Both had been signal types of Christ. Both had been permitted to have personal conference with the Almighty, and to see a portion of his glory on mount Horeb. No *human* testimony, therefore, could equal that which was here given to our Lord's personal dignity and

office by the presence of these illustrious characters; thus recalled from the abode of departed spirits, to heighten the glory of his appearance, and to confirm the faith of his disciples.

We learn from St. Luke what was the subject of the conference which they held with our Lord on this occasion. “They spake of “his decease, which he should accomplish at “Jerusalem^e.” This event was now fast approaching; and was that at the prospect of which the Apostles had taken so great offence. This was afterwards the great stumbling-block both to the Jews and to the Gentiles. Yet it had been prefigured in the Law, and predicted by the Prophets. Moses and Elias may therefore be considered as now called upon to attest the doctrine of “Christ “crucified;” and to confirm what our Lord, after his resurrection, upbraided his disciples with not knowing, that *by* “suffering these “things,” he was to “enter into his glory^f.” The necessity of this for the fulfilment of the prophecies is implied in St. Luke’s expression that his decease should be *accomplished* at Jerusalem: and our Lord’s last words upon the cross, “It is finished,” evidently re-

^e Luke ix. 31.

^f Luke xxiv. 26.

fer to the fulfilment of every thing in the Law as well as in the Prophets, by his death. Thus his humiliation led to his glory. Thus the high purpose of his incarnation was effected. Thus he was “glorified in the Father, “and the Father in him^g.” Having “offered “one sacrifice for sin, he for ever sat down “on the right hand of God^h ;” and “by one “offering perfected for ever them that are “sanctifiedⁱ.” When these things afterwards came to pass, and the Apostles could no longer entertain the fallacious hope of a *temporal*, instead of a *spiritual* Deliverer ; it could not but greatly confirm their faith in this suffering Messiah, that even Moses and Elias had thus borne testimony to its truth. No faithful believer in the Law and the Prophets could scruple to embrace the doctrine in which *they* had concurred, and by which their own pretensions as messengers from God had been so signally confirmed. Nor can we doubt that, with this impression on their minds, the Apostles were led so much the more diligently to “search the Scriptures” of the Old Testament, for corroborative evidence of that which, though the main doctrine of the Christian faith, was to them the most difficult to be received.

^g John xiii. 31.

^h Hebr. x. 12.

ⁱ Hebr. x. 14.

But the testimony borne on such occasion to the great Author of our salvation ended not here. When Peter, yielding to sudden emotions of transport, cried out, “It is good “for us to be here;”—desirous of fixing his abode in the holy mount with these heavenly associates;—“a cloud overshadowed them, “and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my beloved Son: hear HIM.” And “suddenly, when they had looked round “about, they saw no man any more, save “Jesus only with themselves,”—Moses and Elias having, as St. Luke relates, already “departed^k.”

“No man hath seen God at any time^l.” The divine glory was on this occasion concealed from mortal eyes by the cloud that intercepted it. But the *voice* was distinctly heard; and the words which it uttered, though few, were expressive of all that could be desired to assure the disciples of their Lord’s *divine* character, and to strengthen their faith in Him, under whatever discouragements or sufferings. It bore testimony to the relation between the Father and Him, and to the Divine acceptance of the great work of redemption He had undertaken. It taught in substance, what the Apostle to the

^k Luke ix. 35.

^l John i. 18.

Hebrews more explicitly sets forth, that “ God, “ who, at sundry times and in divers manners, “ in time past spake unto the fathers by the “ Prophets, hath in these last days spoken “ unto us by his SON^m.” No such testimony was ever given to any *other* messenger from God. “ Moses verily was faithful in all God’s “ house as a servant; but CHRIST as a SON, “ over *his own house*ⁿ.” Here, then, was the person predicted by Isaiah as “ *Emmanuel*, “ God with us^o ;” by Micah, as “ the Ruler “ whose goings forth had been *from everlasting*^p ;” by Zechariah, as “ the Shepherd, the “ man that is *my fellow*, saith the Lord of “ hosts^q.” In these characters he as far transcended Moses and Elias, as the Creator and Redeemer of men is above them whom He hath made or redeemed. Accordingly, Moses and Elias at the close of this interview instantly disappeared, and Jesus was *left alone*, as the Person thenceforth exclusively to be obeyed. The cessation of the Law and the fulfilment of prophecy in His person were thus significantly implied. Moses and the Prophets had done all that was requisite in their respective missions; and by the authority of Christ, now distinctly re-

^m Hebr. i. 1, 2.

ⁿ Hebr. iii. 5.

^o Matth. i. 23.

^p Micah v. 2.

^q Zech. xiii. 7.

cognised, those missions were superseded and annulled. They had predicted and prefigured Him who was to come. “When that “which is *perfect* had come, then that which “was *in part* was to be done away^r.”

There is yet another main article of our faith, which this wonderful transaction tended especially to illustrate and confirm, *the resurrection from the dead*.

The full proof of this doctrine was to depend upon our Lord’s resurrection; an event, on which, until it actually took place, the disciples appear to have been in continual doubt and perplexity; since, even shortly after this scene of the transfiguration, it is said they were “questioning one with another, “what his rising from the dead should “mean^s.” The probability however, or rather the certainty, that our Lord’s promise in this respect would be made good, was sufficiently evinced by the appearance of Moses and Elias, and also by the *glorified* body which our Lord assumed. St. Luke adds, that “they also,” that is, Moses and Elias, “*appeared in glory*^t.” Ocular testimony was thus vouchsafed to the three disciples, of what St. Paul afterwards taught, that at the general resurrection Christ will “change our

^r 1 Cor. xiii. 10.

^s Mark ix. 10.

^t Luke ix. 31.

“*vile* body, that it may be fashioned like
 “unto his *glorious* body^v ;” that “this *cor-*
 “*ruptible* must put on *incorruption*, and this
 “*mortal* must put on *immortality*^w ;” that
 that which is “sown in *dishonour* will be
 “raised in *glory*,” and that which is “sown a
 “*natural* body” will be “raised a *spiritual*
 “body^x.”

That the Apostles *at first* apprehended these things as clearly as they afterwards did, or as *we* are now enabled to do, by a comparison of them with subsequent events, is hardly to be supposed. They were “charged,” indeed, to “tell no man what things “they had seen, till the Son of Man were ‘risen from the dead’ ;” and they accordingly, says St. Luke, “kept it close, and “told no man in those days any of those “things which they had seen^z.” It could have answered little purpose to relate to others an event so marvellous as this, until the great mystery of man’s redemption was so fully illustrated by the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Redeemer, as to render its purpose and effect more distinctly discernible. But in the pages of the evangelical history it *now* stands recorded, as one of the

^v Phil. iii. 21. ^w 1 Cor. xv. 53. ^x 1 Cor. xv.
 43, 44. ^y Mark ix. 9. ^z Luke ix. 36.

strongest testimonies to our Lord's divine character; shedding also a peculiar kind of lustre upon the great object of his coming into the world, and connecting that object with the preceding dispensations by which it had been introduced. As an evidence of the truth of Christianity itself St. Peter regards it, when he says, "We have not followed
" cunningly-devised fables, when we made
" known unto you the power and coming of
" our Lord Jesus Christ, but were *eye-wit-*
" *nesses* of his majesty. For he received from
" God the Father, honour and glory, when
" there came such a voice to Him from the
" excellent glory, This is my beloved Son in
" whom I am well pleased. And this voice
" which came from heaven *we heard*, when
" we were with Him in the holy mount^a."

The impression made upon the Apostles by this extraordinary incident was, indeed, neither weak nor transient. It was treasured up in their remembrance as a transaction of high and awful importance, to be in due time more perfectly understood and more generally made known. In the mean while, it seems greatly to have sustained their own hope and confidence. If it did not reconcile them to the thought of those bitter sufferings

^a 2 Peter i. 16, 17, 18.

which their blessed Master was to undergo, it at least repressed their murmurings and silenced their doubts, whenever the unwelcome subject was renewed. St. Luke relates that on the very next day, when our Lord again warned them of what was about to befall him, though still perplexed and reluctant to believe, “they *feared* to ask him “of that saying^b.” They found that there was some mysterious *necessity* in the case, which they dared not explore; and the high conceptions they had now formed of their Lord, withheld them from repeating their previous expressions of mistrust or offence.

But whatever contributed to remove the doubts of the Apostles, or to increase their fidelity and veneration towards their blessed Master, applies also, with no inconsiderable force, to *ourselves*. We are now enabled, by that abundance of concurrent proofs which the sacred volume supplies, to view the whole system of Christianity in all its parts and details, to discern their wonderful connection and harmony, and thence to appreciate its full value, its truth, and its importance. Thus, the mysterious significancy of the *transfiguration* is wonderfully elucidated by the completion of the Law and the Prophets in the person of

^b Luke ix. 45.

our Saviour, by the multiplied proofs in holy writ of his Divinity and the atonement he hath made for sin, by his resurrection and ascension, and by the assurances thence given of the resurrection of all his faithful disciples to a future state of bliss and glory. The sublime scene presented to the chosen Apostles, brings all these high and important subjects before us. It represents Him who left the bosom of the Father, and took our nature upon Him, as exalted far above every name that is named in heaven or in earth. It shews His mission to have been infinitely superior to any that had ever before been undertaken, and that the dispensations of former times were to give way to that more perfect one which He established; being that to which every other was but preparatory and subordinate. It encourages us to place our faith in a crucified Saviour, who, though “despised and rejected of men,” was “mighty to save^c.” It elevates our thoughts, our desires, our expectations, above this lower world; carrying them on to that final consummation of all things, when the faithful shall “come unto mount Sion, and unto the “city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of

^c Isaiah lxiii. 1.

“ angels, to the general assembly and church
 “ of the first-born, which are written in hea-
 “ ven, and to God the Judge of all, and to
 “ the spirits of just men made perfect, and to
 “ Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant^d.”

The truths shadowed out by this marvellous representation are substantiated in other parts of holy writ by express revelations, too plain and obvious to be misunderstood. They are no longer wrapped up in mystical envelopement, nor, as under preceding dispensations, in types and parables of dark and figurative signification. The full meridian light of the Gospel has rendered them visible and conspicuous to all who will open their eyes to perceive them. While, therefore, we admire and reverence those obscurer communications which were gradually made in the earlier ages of the world, let us bless God for the advantages we ourselves derive from clearer manifestations of the truth. In proportion, however, to these advantages will be the account we must render of our improvement under them. Fearful are the judgments denounced against those who either reject this gracious dispensation, or pervert it to an evil purpose. God grant that we may none of us fall under that sentence,

^d Hebr. xii. 22, 23, 24.

of which He who will hereafter come to be our Judge Himself hath forewarned us, “This
“ is the condemnation, that light is come into
“ the world, and men have loved darkness
“ rather than light, because their deeds are
“ evil^e.”

^e John iii. 19.

SERMON VI.

MATTHEW viii. 28.

And when he was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met him two possessed with devils, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way.

AMONG the several kinds of miracles by which our Lord manifested his Divine power during his abode on earth, none have undergone more rigid inquiry than those which relate to the healing of persons said to have been possessed with devils. And the reason why these may be thought liable to more suspicion than others, is, perhaps, because the *disease* itself, as well as the removal of it, is represented to have been *preternatural*. The subject also is so frequently brought under our observation by the Evangelists, as one of the most prominent features in our Lord's ministry, that to form a right conception of it cannot but be deemed of great importance. Nor (as I shall endeavour to prove in this Discourse) is it attended with

any insuperable difficulties, notwithstanding the labours of sceptical men to involve it in doubt and perplexity.

The first point to be considered is the nature of the malady itself, as it is represented to us in the sacred history.

By what external symptoms the disorders with which the Demoniacs were afflicted were distinguishable from other bodily maladies, and how it was discerned that they were produced by the agency of evil spirits, it is not easy for those who never witnessed such occurrences to form a clear apprehension. But that there were certain tokens by which these diseases were then generally known, so as not to be confounded with ordinary distempers, it is reasonable to infer from the manner in which they are spoken of by the sacred writers, from the peculiar circumstances related of the persons so affected, and from the consequences that ensued on the alleged expulsion of the evil spirits.

Many of the symptoms attending these demoniacal possessions, appear, indeed, to have been such as are incidental to *natural* disorders of the human frame. Some of the unhappy sufferers were dumb; others, blind and dumb; others, dumb and deaf; others, distorted, convulsed, or epileptic; others, lu-

natic, and impelled by maniacal rage and fury to the most frantic actions. Nevertheless, the Evangelists uniformly speak of these several cases, though accompanied with such variety of symptoms, as disorders distinct from the ordinary maladies of blindness, dumbness, deafness, lunacy, or epilepsy; in the cure of which disorders likewise our Lord continually exercised his miraculous power. Thus St. Matthew states, that “ they brought
 “ unto Jesus all sick people that were taken
 “ with divers diseases and torments, and those
 “ which were possessed with devils, and those
 “ which were lunatic, and those that had the
 “ palsy; and he healed them ^a.” St. Mark, in like manner, says, “ They brought unto him
 “ all that were diseased, and them that
 “ were possessed with devils :—and he healed
 “ many that were sick of divers diseases, and
 “ cast out many devils ^b.” St. Luke also (himself a physician, and whose accuracy on such subjects has been noticed by persons distinguished for medical science) makes the same distinction between these and other maladies. He says, “ all they that had any
 “ sick with divers diseases, brought them
 “ unto him, and he laid his hands on every
 “ one of them, and healed them. And devils

^a Matth. iv. 24.

^b Mark i. 32, 34.

“ also came out of many, crying out, and saying, Thou art Christ, the Son of God ^c.” These passages sufficiently prove, that, however similar many of the symptoms attending the disorders under which the Demoniacs laboured might be to those of common bodily or mental diseases, yet there was something in them different from ordinary or natural distempers; and that the distinction (whatever it might be) was so perceptible, as to be easily known by those who witnessed the effect. Else, why should the Jews in general have marked them as *peculiar* in their character, though exhibiting symptoms, in other respects, not unusual in bodily infirmities, and such as never were ascribed to any other than natural causes? And why should the Apostles, and even our Lord himself, so invariably describe them under the specific character of demoniacal possessions?

It has, however, been maintained, that the diseases of Demoniacs were neither more nor less than madness of various kinds, or, in some cases, epilepsy; and that our Lord and his Apostles merely conformed to the popular phraseology, in speaking of them as actual possessions of evil spirits. And to prove

^c Luke iv. 40, 41.

this, much learned and laborious investigation has been expended on the meaning of the words Demons and Demoniacs, according to their usual acceptation among the Jews and among heathen writers; with the intent to shew, that the supposition of such possessions rests entirely on the vague and idle superstitions of the Gentile world, or on the ignorant credulity of the Jewish multitude: whence the inference is drawn, that there was nothing extraordinary in these cases; nothing to place them in a different class from the numberless other maladies, in the cure of which our Lord was wont to exercise his miraculous power.

Now, not to enlarge further upon what has been already observed, that the sacred writers expressly distinguish these cases from other maladies, including even lunacy itself; it may be remarked, that the very circumstances related of the persons so afflicted, appear to have been such as neither insanity, nor epilepsy, nor any other natural disease, will satisfactorily account for. The Demoniacs, though thus disordered in mind and body, know and acknowledge Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God. They address him as such; they dread him as their Lord and Judge; they expostulate with him under

that impression ; they discover a knowledge of his dignity and office, not only inconsistent with the wild ravings of a disordered imagination, and the state of exclusion from society incidental to persons so circumstanced, but such as even the Jews in general had not attained to. Their confessions of Christ were uniform and unequivocal ; not variable and hesitating, like those of the multitude, some of whom believed at one time, and doubted at another ; and of whom comparatively few acknowledged him in his true character as the Son of God. To what can we attribute this, but to some superior agents within the Demoniacs themselves, bearing involuntary testimony to that Power, at whose presence they “believed and trembled ?”

Respecting the opinions prevalent among heathens concerning the nature of those demons or evil spirits, whom they supposed to be the proximate cause of such maladies, it is to little purpose to inquire ; since the main question, whether the maladies themselves were natural or preternatural, depends not on the issue of such an inquiry. The theory of heathen *Demonology*, (if we may so call it,) and the analogy it bears to what is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, are abstruse and difficult subjects, on which there is great scope

for variety of conjecture. If it could even be proved that the Jews borrowed their notions of demons from the heathen ; still this would be no evidence to disprove the *facts* on which the belief of demoniacal possessions is founded ; nor could any difference of opinion as to the former point lessen the validity of substantial testimony to the latter. This, therefore, is rather an extraneous matter of controversy engrafted on the main subject, than essential to it ; and appears to have had greater stress laid on it than it really deserves.

The main point to be considered appears to be this ;—whether, on a matter so purely dependent on Divine revelation as our knowledge of the agency of invisible spirits, we are to be determined by human conjectures and theories, or ought to abide by the statements of the inspired writers. It is a question which concerns us only as believers in holy writ ; since, if the authority of the sacred writers be set aside, it is no longer a point of religious concern.

Is it, then, to be imagined, that the Apostles, and even our Lord himself, would have given countenance to the popular belief in these cases, if that belief had been altogether erroneous ? Nothing can be more unambi-

guous than the expressions used by the Evangelists, in describing these cases; nor can any thing more strongly confirm their representations of them, than the conduct of *our Lord* towards the persons so afflicted, and *their* demeanour towards *Him*. In the cure of ordinary maladies, we find the blessed Jesus, for the most part, simply exercising his Divine energy by a word or a touch; or suspending the exertion of it, only until he had exacted from the sufferers themselves, or from others interested in their behalf, some public testimony of faith in his power. But in administering relief to the *Demoniacs*, he addresses, not the afflicted patient, but the tormenting agent; whom he converses with, rebukes, and commands with authority to quit his possession. Now, what could the multitude infer from this? What could He, who “came into the world that he “should bear witness unto the truth^d,” intend by such conduct, if, after all, there were no evil spirits to dispossess? Why did he thus distinguish these cases from others? Why did he, purposely, as it should seem, avail himself also of these opportunities to assert his general power over the invisible

^d John xviii. 37.

world of spirits? To suppose that on a subject like this (relating, not to a mere philosophical opinion, in which it mattered little what notions the multitude entertained, but to a point of prime magnitude in a *religious* point of view) our Lord would thus comply with popular errors and prejudices, is surely to forget the sanctity and dignity of his character. Still less ought it to be imagined, that he would not, in his private and more confidential discourses with his disciples, have undeceived them, if they were in error on this point. Instead of which, we find him often conversing with *them* on this subject in terms precisely of the same import with those which he used in public. And what, more than all, throws the weight of his authority into this scale, is the argument which he raised with the Jews, on the fact of his casting out devils, to prove that his power was *Divine*, and could not proceed (as they had blasphemously affirmed) from Beelzebub, the prince of the devils. “If Satan,” says he, “cast out Satan, how shall his kingdom stand? but if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you^e.” Throughout the whole

^e Matth. xii. 26. Mark iii. 23. Luke xi. 20.

of that memorable conversation with the cap-
tious and unbelieving Pharisees, the *reality*
of these demoniacal possessions is evidently
assumed as the basis of the argument; and
the inference drawn from it is, that they who
attributed miracles of so peculiar a descrip-
tion to the work of the evil spirit, were not
only, in the most direct manner, blasphemers
of the Holy Spirit, but stood self-convicted
by the absurdity of their own reasonings, in
supposing that the immediate agent in these
possessions would be instrumental to his own
defeat.

Moreover, the *effect* produced by the dis-
possession of these evil spirits, upon the De-
moniacs themselves, affords additional evi-
dence to the same purpose. Not only did
the symptoms of the *bodily* disease straight-
way disappear, but the sanity of the *mind*
was instantly restored. Instead of murmurs
and expostulations, instead of rage and terror
at the approach of the Son of God, they who
were thus recovered, intreated permission to
follow Jesus, and to “be with him” for their
comfort and protection. The spirits them-
selves are represented as departing with to-
kens of fury and disappointment; whilst
they whom they had led captive experience
the liveliest satisfaction and tranquillity on

being delivered from a tyranny so tormenting and oppressive.

These general observations on the case of the Gospel Demoniacs will help to illustrate the particular miracle to which the words of the text relate.

This miracle, with some slight variations in the account of it, is recorded by three of the Evangelists. St. Mark and St. Luke speak of *one* Demoniac only : St. Matthew, of *two*. The former, who relate the matter more circumstantially, appear to have confined their narrative to one Demoniac in particular, who was probably more fierce and violent than the other. St. Matthew, who relates the occurrence in a more general manner, mentions both. Again ; St. Matthew states, that the miracle was wrought in the country of the *Gergesenes*; St. Mark and St. Luke, that it was in the country of the *Gadarenes*^f; the cities of Gergesa and Gadara being near to each other, and both situate on the same side of the lake Tiberias; whence, probably, the country around was

^f It should be observed, however, that there are manuscripts of high authority, including the Vatican, which in the text of St. Matthew read *Gadarenes*, conformably with St. Mark and St. Luke. See Wetstein and Griesbach; the former of whom assigns cogent reasons for supposing this to have been the genuine reading.

sometimes called the country of the Gergesenes, sometimes the country of the Gadarenes. In other respects, the narratives of the three Evangelists are so similar, as to leave no doubt that they all relate to one and the same transaction.

The fury of these Demoniacs (particularly of that one whom St. Mark and St. Luke describe) is represented as so outrageous, that “no man might pass by that way;” nor could any art or force subdue it. Nevertheless, at the sight of Jesus, a most extraordinary indication of awe and terror appears in their demeanour towards Him:—“What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?” Art thou come to send us, before the final day of judgment, into that place of torment which we know to be prepared for us hereafter? “for” (add the other Evangelists) “he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man^g.” Jesus then (that the greatness of the miracle might be the more apparent) “asked him, saying, What is thy name? And he said, Legion; because many devils had entered into him. And they besought Him, that he would not command them to go out into the deep^h,”—

^g Mark v. 8. Luke viii. 29.

^h Luke viii. 30, 31.

into that abyss where they were to be reserved in chains of darkness,—but that he would suffer them to continue for some time longer upon earth.

Such was the condition in which our Lord found these wretched sufferers. To treat the discourse which they thus held with him as the mere ravings of a disordered imagination, is only attempting to get rid of one difficulty at the expense of another still greater. For whence could persons thus disordered in mind, and secluded from the haunts of men,—so much so, that all intercourse with them had been shunned as dangerous and terrific,—whence could they have such knowledge of the character of Jesus and of the purpose of his coming, as to confess him to be the Son of God, and to deprecate his judgments? If the paroxysm of the disorder was upon them at the moment, surely such an acknowledgment of his personal dignity and office is altogether inconceivable. And if it were a lucid interval, would not the unhappy individuals, like other bodily sufferers, rather have implored the help of the compassionate Jesus, than have shrunk from his approach? From this dilemma it seems impossible to extricate those who deny, in this instance, any other agency on the part of the maniac, than

that of his own distempered faculties. But admit, according to the obvious and literal interpretation of the passage, the actual possession of the man by evil spirits, and no other difficulty adheres to it than that which must ever attend all attempts on our part to conceive how any spiritual power can act upon the bodily organs; a difficulty which we must be content to leave unexplained, unless it were given us to “know even as “we are known.”

The literal exposition, however, of this part of the narrative, is rendered still more certain, from what immediately follows. “There “was a good way off from them an herd “of many swine feeding: so the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, “suffer us to go into the herd of swine. “And he said unto them, Go. And when “they were come out, they went into the “herd of swine; and behold, the whole herd “of swine ran violently down a steep place “into the sea, and perished in the waters.”

Respecting this part of the transaction, it seems hardly possible to explain away the alleged agency of the evil spirits. No paroxysm of phrensy, no distemper of the imagination, on the part of the Demoniacs themselves, can be conceived capable of forming,

much less of executing, so strange a design. The agents, whatever they were, which had taken possession of the men, manifestly transferred their violence to the helpless brutes, and hurried them to destruction. The men, on the other hand, (as both St. Mark and St. Luke relate,) having instantly recovered their understandings, were found “sitting, clothed, “and in their right mindⁱ.” One of them even requested Jesus “that he might be with “him. Howbeit, Jesus suffered him not; “but saith unto him, Go home to thy friends, “and tell them how great things the Lord “hath done for thee, and hath had compas- “sion on thee. And he departed, and began “to publish in Decapolis how great things “Jesus had done for him^k.”

Such was the publicity given to the whole of this transaction; and such the accumulation of evidence, tending to shew that in this signal instance our Lord held conflict with a power more than human, with a power which no mortal skill or strength could subdue; at the same time testifying his dominion over the spirits as well as the bodies of men, and his ability to rescue them from the malignant enemies of the one, no

ⁱ Mark v. 15. Luke viii. 35.

^k Mark v. 18, 19, 20.

less than from the natural maladies of the other.

Thus far every thing serves to illustrate the Divine power and goodness of the Saviour of mankind. But there is yet a difficulty to be noticed respecting our Lord's compliance with the request of the evil spirits to enter into the herd of swine; permitting, not only the destruction of the animals, but also loss and injury to the owners of them, who do not appear to have had any concern in the transaction.

This is one of the very few instances, if not the only one, in which our Lord's miraculous power was exercised in producing consequences injurious to men's temporal interests. The probable solution of the matter appears to be this.

The country of the Gadarenes, or Gergesenes, though belonging to the Jewish nation, was inhabited partly by Jews and partly by heathens. By the law of Moses, the Jews were prohibited from eating swine's flesh: and by a subsequent law they were forbidden to keep swine in their country. Whether, therefore, this herd were kept by Jews, in direct violation of their law; or by heathens, as a snare to the Jews, who were thereby tempted to transgress the law; its

destruction might be permitted in punishment of so manifest a disregard of the Divine injunctions. And although our Lord was not wont to interpose judicially in temporal concerns, yet, under such special circumstances, as none might presume to question his authority thus proved to be more than human, so can it not be doubted that the effect would be salutary, both as to the offending parties themselves, and on others who were in danger of being ensnared by their evil practices. In the exercise, therefore, of his compassion towards the Demoniacs on the one hand, and of retributive justice towards the Gadarene violators of the Jewish Law on the other; our Lord asserted his character as the Saviour and as the Judge of men, giving demonstrative assurance of his just pretensions in both respects. That the Gadarenes themselves were in some degree sensible of this, may be inferred from the terror with which the miracle impressed them, and from their not presuming to utter complaints on the loss they had sustained. Dread of the judicial power of our Lord, and vexation at being deprived of their unlawful gain, appear indeed to have taken such possession of their minds, that his benevolence in delivering two of their fellow-creatures from

so miserable a state was utterly disregarded :
“ they besought him to depart out of their
“ coasts¹.” The fame of the miracle was
nevertheless spread by one of the parties on
whom it had been wrought, who “ went his
“ way, and published throughout the whole
“ city how great things Jesus had done unto
“ him :” and such was the effect, that when
Jesus returned thither, “ the people gladly
“ received him ; for they were all waiting for
“ him^m.”

If the considerations, then, which have
here been stated respecting the case of the
Demoniacs in general, as well as this instance
in particular, be of weight to remove the
doubts and objections which men, weak in
faith, or prone to disputation, may have
raised against them ; we shall be at no loss
to perceive how valuable an accession of tes-
timony to our Lord’s Divine character and
mission is hereby obtained, and how espe-
cially miracles of this description were adapt-
ed to manifest the great purpose of his com-
ing into the world.

That evil spirits, with the great apostate
spirit at their head, (emphatically called “ the
“ prince of the power of the air”,”) are per-

¹ Matth. viii. 34.
ii. 2.

^m Luke viii. 39, 40.

ⁿ Ephes.

mitted by the Almighty to tempt men to evil, and, for the trial of their integrity, occasionally to molest and injure them ; is a fact, which, as far as the authority of the sacred writings can go, seems to be established beyond the power of refutation. To attempt to set aside this evidence by abstract reasoning on the general improbability of the thing, is surely most unreasonable. Of the actual existence of such beings, we naturally know nothing. We can neither prove it nor disprove it by any physical or moral evidence. It is a matter only to be known through the medium of Revelation. Nothing, however, in the visible phenomena of nature contradicts it, or gives even a just suspicion that it is impossible or improbable. On the contrary, that gradation in the scale of being which we perceive in the *visible* world, leads by analogy to a conjecture that there may be something similar in that which is *invisible* ; and that between man and his Creator many intermediate intelligences of various orders may exist. That among these, evil as well as good beings should be permitted, for special purposes of God's providence, to exercise their agency to an extent and in a manner to us inconceivable ; is in itself no more incredible than the acknowledged fact, of

which we have daily and hourly experience, that, in our own species, numberless are the instances of wicked and mischievous beings, who scarcely seem to exist but for the purpose of inflicting misery upon themselves and others, and who apparently act as scourges in the hands of the Almighty, for the chastisement or the probation of their fellow creatures. Let the vain disputer of the world solve this problem, which so continually presents itself to his view, before he presumes to question what the word of God reveals, or to reason upon the counsels of the Almighty, inscrutable to mortal apprehension.

So far, however, as the wisdom or the goodness of God may seem to be implicated in this inquiry, he who enters upon it with an humble and teachable spirit will be satisfied with the assurance, that, whatever may be the disposition or the power of any invisible beings to inflict evil upon us, they as well as other created beings are, and ever must be, subject to the controul and restraint of HIM “whose kingdom ruleth over all.” This (as the word of God reveals to us) was proved by the fall of these apostate spirits from the high estate they at first enjoyed, to a state of degradation and misery from which they have no redemption. It was further shewn

by that entire mastery over them which our Lord exercised during his abode on earth, in delivering men from the effects of their cruelty and malice. And probably for this, among other reasons, it might be permitted by the Almighty, that at and near to the period of the Messiah's coming their malignant agency should be more extensively and more perceptibly felt. Occasion was thus given signally to illustrate the declared purpose of his manifestation in the flesh, "*that he might destroy the works of the Devil*°." From the beginning it had been foretold that he should "bruise the serpent's head;" and his victory over the great spiritual adversary of mankind is frequently represented as indispensable to the work he had undertaken. To signify his power in this respect more ostensibly to the world, these miracles appear to have been especially wrought. With reference, perhaps, to these, in particular, the Prophet Zechariah foretold that he should "cause the unclean spirit to pass out of the land^p;" and when the disciples expressed their astonishment at this evidence of his Divine authority, his reply was, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven^q;" alluding to another prophecy of Isaiah to the

° 1 John iii. 8.

p Zech. xiii. 2.

q Luke x. 18.

same effect. These considerations seem to strengthen the probability of some extraordinary prevalence of these demoniacal possessions at that particular juncture, when the plenitude of the power and rage of the adversary may be supposed to have been put forth, in the struggle which he endeavoured to maintain with the great Captain of our salvation. The result was in every respect glorious to the Redeemer. His *sovereignty* was established by this proof of his command over the invisible as well as the visible creation. His *justice* was displayed in thus overpowering the malice of the evil one. His *mercy* and *goodness* were signalized, not only in releasing men from these *bodily* torments, but also in thereby giving a pledge and assurance that he would extricate them from their *spiritual* bondage to the great enemy of their souls. It betokened also that the time was approaching when all the lying vanities of Paganism, its magic and sorcery, its oracles and divinations, its idolatrous rites and its cruel and unnatural abominations, (the long-continued work of Him who was “the father of lies,” and “a murderer from the beginning^r,”) should experience a fatal overthrow, and be brought to “a perpetual shame^s.”

^r John viii. 44.

^s Jeremiah xxiii. 40.

Thus were men prepared for those great events which speedily followed the preaching of the Gospel; when Gentiles, as well as Jews, were called to participate in its blessings, when multitudes of them obeyed the call, “cast their idols to the moles and to the bats^t,” and pressed with eagerness to be admitted into the kingdom of God.

Hence too we are taught on WHOM to rely for help and strength, to deliver us from our spiritual enemies; even on HIM who gave these convincing testimonies that he was “mighty to save,” as well as irresistible in punishment. We are taught also, not only to “praise the Lord for his goodness, “and to declare the wonders that he doeth “for the children of men^u;” but to reflect, that as He thus “led captivity captive,” and destroyed the power of the Destroyer over the bodies of men; so should it be *our* constant desire and endeavour, by that heavenly aid which He hath purchased for us, to subdue those evil lusts and passions “which war “against the *soul*,” and which “bring us into “captivity to the law of sin.” Warned by these admonitions and fortified with these encouragements, nothing can be wanting to ensure success, but a readiness on our part to

^t Isaiah ii. 20.

^u Psalm cvii. 8.

avail ourselves of the proffered help. For though we are “set in the midst of so many
“and great dangers, that, by reason of the
“frailty of our nature, we cannot always
“stand upright;” yet have we the promise of
“such strength and protection as will support us in all dangers, and carry us through
“all temptations.” For this, let us make our constant supplications to the throne of grace; knowing that “He is faithful who hath promised, and that what He hath promised
“He is able also to perform ^x.”

^x Rom. iv. 21.

SERMON VII.

MATTHEW XX. 16.

So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

ALTHOUGH the parables delivered by our blessed Saviour are among the most generally edifying portions of holy writ; yet in the application of them to other times than those in which they were delivered, or to the spiritual concerns of individual Christians, great caution is sometimes requisite. For the most part, they had an immediate reference to the Jews, to whom they were addressed; and unless this reference be kept in view, erroneous conceptions may be formed of their intent. Some of them also appear to have arisen out of occasional and personal occurrences; without attention to which they are no less liable to be misapprehended.

The parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard, to which the words of the text relate,

has, from such misapprehensions, been variously interpreted. It has been pressed as an argument for relying on the efficacy of sudden conversions, or of a death-bed repentance. It has been applied to uphold the Calvinistic tenet of arbitrary election to eternal life. Some conceive it to have reference to the several dispensations of revealed religion *before* the coming of Christ. Others consider it as referring to different ages of the *Christian church*; and endeavour to point out certain periods of ecclesiastical history, to which the several hours of the day may be made to correspond. Some again confine it to the ministers of God's word; others extend it to the whole body of the church; some make it significant of the *external* privileges of the faithful; others, of the *internal*. According to these different views of the scope and design of the parable, different expositions have been given of it; oftentimes rather fanciful than solid, and adopted for the purpose of supporting a favourite system or hypothesis.

Without entering into a discussion of these various interpretations, it may sufficiently appear how far any of them are well or ill-founded, if we attentively consider the *occasion* on which the parable was delivered, and

compare its circumstances with the *characters* and *situations* of the parties to whom it was addressed. And while we thus endeavour to elicit its true intent, it will be necessary also to bear in mind that great fundamental truth, that “God is no respecter of persons ^a ;” that the means of grace and the hope of glory are not *arbitrarily* dispensed or withholden, so as to make men responsible for what they have not, or free from responsibility for what they have ; but that, in all the Divine dealings with mankind, just regard will ever be had to their respective circumstances and conditions : so that none shall hereafter have reason to complain of the retribution that awaits them. These are truths so continually inculcated in holy writ, that no portion of its sacred word can be rightly applied, without reference to them as the standard by which its meaning is to be determined.

To begin then with the *occasion* which led to this remarkable discourse.

Our Lord’s disciples during his ministry on earth appear to have been strongly tainted with the prejudices of their fellow-countrymen respecting the nature of the Messiah’s kingdom ; and were with difficulty

^a Acts x. 34.

brought to bear any intimations that it was “not of this world.” Even the chosen Twelve, who constantly attended on his ministry and possessed his especial confidence, entertained a persuasion that, in consideration of these privileges, they might lay claim to higher marks of future distinction than others who embraced the Gospel; and that having devoted themselves entirely to his service, they should not fail of obtaining some extraordinary recompense for their fidelity and zeal.

A remarkable conversation to this effect is recorded in the preceding chapter. Our Lord had taken occasion, from the conduct of a young man who relinquished the intention of becoming his disciple through fear of losing his worldly possessions, to observe how difficult it was for men of great worldly substance to submit to the hardships and privations which were likely to result from embracing the profession of the Gospel. The disciples being astonished and perplexed at this observation, Peter seized the opportunity to magnify his own disinterestedness, and that of the other Apostles, in following Jesus; and to intimate their expectation of a proportionate reward:—“Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed Thee; what

“ shall *we* have therefore^b ?” Our Lord assures them that their reward should be great and excellent. “ Verily, I say unto you, That
 “ ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man shall sit in the
 “ throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon
 “ twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes
 “ of Israel.” This promise appears to have reference to the government of the Christian church, which was afterwards more solemnly vested in the Apostles by our Lord himself before his ascension, and was subsequently confirmed to them by the miraculous effusion of the Holy Spirit. This was to be their special recompense. But lest they should infer from this that a greater measure of the Divine favour would finally be bestowed upon *them* than upon other faithful disciples, he adds, “ And *every one* that hath
 “ forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or
 “ father, or mother, or wife, or children, or
 “ lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an
 “ hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting
 “ life.” To this, however, he subjoins a caution, needful to all who might be inclined to presume upon any extraordinary privileges vouchsafed to them ;—“ but many that are
 “ first shall be last ; and the last shall be

^b Matth. xix. 27, 28, 29, 30.

“ first.” The high prerogative of being called to the apostolic office brought with it a weight of awful responsibility. If it placed them above others with respect to the importance of their charge; still it was not to supersede the claims of those who, with equal zeal and fidelity, were ready to discharge the duties of their respective stations, however inferior in magnitude and importance. Great also as the advantage unquestionably was, of being personally attendant upon our Lord’s ministry, and among the *first* who were called and invited by him to enter into his fold, or to exercise pastoral authority over it; yet even among these might be many who would forfeit their claims to preeminence, and ultimately be cast out as faithless and unprofitable servants: while the *last* and lowest in these respects, persons admitted in later ages into the bosom of the church, under no such favourable auspices, nor holding any distinguished station in its ministry, might so diligently and faithfully acquit themselves of their Christian calling, as to outstrip their competitors in the race, and obtain the prize which the others had deservedly lost.

In illustration of the saying, “ Many that
“ are first shall be last, and the last shall be

“ first,” our Lord delivers this parable:—
 “ The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man
 “ that is an householder, which went out
 “ early in the morning to hire labourers into
 “ his vineyard. And when he had agreed
 “ with the labourers for a penny a day, he
 “ sent them into his vineyard. And he went
 “ out about the third hour, and saw others
 “ standing idle in the market-place, and said
 “ unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard,
 “ and whatsoever is right I will give you.
 “ And they went their way. Again he went
 “ out about the sixth and ninth hour, and
 “ did likewise. And about the eleventh hour
 “ he went out, and found others standing
 “ idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye
 “ here all the day idle? They say unto him,
 “ Because no man hath hired us. He saith
 “ unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard;
 “ and whatsoever is right, that shall ye re-
 “ ceive. So when even was come, the lord of
 “ the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call
 “ the labourers, and give them their hire, be-
 “ ginning from the last unto the first. And
 “ when they came that were hired about the
 “ eleventh hour, they received every man a
 “ penny. But when the first came, they sup-
 “ posed that they should have received more:
 “ and they likewise received every man a

“ penny. And when they had received it,
“ they murmured against the good man of
“ the house, saying, These last have wrought
“ but one hour, and thou hast made them
“ equal unto us, which have borne the bur-
“ den and heat of the day. But he answered
“ one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no
“ wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a
“ penny? Take that thine is, and go thy
“ way: I will give unto this last, even as unto
“ thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I
“ will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, be-
“ cause I am good^b?” Thus ends the parable.
Then our Lord again repeats the aphorism
with which he had introduced it: “ So the
“ last shall be first, and the first last: for
“ many be called, but few chosen.”

The metaphors of *a vineyard* and *the Lord of the vineyard* were of frequent occurrence in the Old Testament, and were well understood by the Jews to denote the state of those who were admitted into covenant with God. The Jews were bound by that covenant to the observance of a burdensome ritual; on which depended their acceptance with God. To them “ pertained the adoption, and the
“ glory, and the covenants, and the giving of
“ the Law, and the service of God, and the

^b Matt. xx. 1—15.

“promises^c.” And when our Lord himself appeared, he first opened his mission to the *Jews*; declaring that “salvation was of the *Jews*^d,” and that he “was not sent but to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel^e.” All these circumstances concurred to impress the minds of the Jews in general, and of the Apostles in particular, with strong persuasions of their *national* interest in the coming of the Messiah, and of their being marked out for future distinctions and rewards to which no other people had an equal claim.

But to these national claims as Jews, the Apostles, it has already been observed, super-added others, which they conceived to be personally and exclusively their own. They had been individually called by our Lord himself, at the very first hour of his ministry; and in their alacrity to obey the call had “forsaken “all, and followed Him.” Hence the petition of the mother of Zebedee’s children, that her two sons, James and John, might sit the one on his right hand, and the other on his left, in his kingdom. Hence the strife among them which should be the greatest. Hence their solicitude to know, after his resurrection, whether he would then restore the

^c Rom. ix. 4.

^d John iv. 22.

^e Matth. xv. 24.

kingdom to Israel. These and other similar occurrences shew that before their minds were thoroughly enlightened by the miraculous descent of the Holy Spirit, they were very much disposed to arrogate to themselves high claims, and to form somewhat extravagant expectations of their future destinies.

These expectations the parable was calculated to moderate and restrain. It taught them that their *final* recompense would be grounded on claims of a more *general* nature, and not on those of national or personal favour: that in this respect “God’s ways were “not as their ways, nor his thoughts as their “thoughts;” that “His ways were equal, and “theirs unequal;” that the kingdom of heaven being now opened to *all* believers, was accessible to the Gentile as well as to the Jew; to the late penitent as well as to the early convert; to future ages as well as to that of himself and His Apostles; that there was ONE covenant, ONE hope, ONE faith, ONE promise, by which all were equally and alike to be bound, who should either then or thereafter become his servants; and that by their actual fulfilment of that covenant would their ultimate reward be regulated, whatever were the circumstances in which they might individually be placed.

The main features of the parable sufficiently correspond with this view of its design. The chief difficulty arises, not from the first labourers receiving *no more* than the wages of a whole day, but from the last receiving *so much*. This it is proper to observe, because it shews the complaint of the former to have been *unjust*; and that they had no pretensions to interfere with the bounty bestowed on the latter. Yet this conduct was strikingly exemplified in the Jews, who vehemently complained of the admission of the Gentiles to the same privileges with themselves. The parable also intimates that it was not the *fault* of those who came late into the vineyard, that they did not enter sooner. No man had *hired* them. The Gospel had not *first* been preached to the Gentiles. They *could* not come until the invitation had been given, until the Gospel had been actually made known to them. *Their* case, therefore, was not to be regarded with feelings of envy or jealousy. Here lies the force of the reproof to the first labourers who murmured against the householder,—
*“ Is it not lawful for me to do what I will
 “ with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I
 “ am good?”* Was the unprofitable state of the heathen world, while living in darkness

and ignorance, to be alleged as a reason against their receiving a full share of the light and blessings of the Gospel, if, as soon as they were called to the knowledge of it, they readily obeyed the call? Or was God himself to be restricted in the offer and the exercise of his mercy, by the selfishness of those who from the first had partaken of his favour?

If we take the parable in a more restricted point of view, as specially addressed to the Apostles themselves, who had been *first* called by their Lord to be labourers in his vineyard; the same considerations will press with equal weight. For though the labours of the Apostles, and their immediate successors in the primitive church, were doubtless attended with extraordinary hardships and difficulties, and the harvest of their labours was the fruit of incessant toil, and peril, and persecution; yet their peculiar advantages and the extraordinary aids vouchsafed to them were proportioned to these difficulties. And since it was the design of Providence to perpetuate throughout all ages of the church a sacred ministry for the admission of mankind into the covenant of salvation, and for their instruction in the way of righteousness; the labours of *subsequent* teachers, at whatever

period, would be no less necessary, and no less acceptable to the Lord of the vineyard, than those who had preceded them, provided there was in the one the same faithful and diligent discharge of duty as in the other. In this respect, therefore, the last would be as the first, and the first as the last. Where the purpose and the effect of the labour, as well as the disposition of the labourers, were the same; the recompense also, through God's gracious favour, would be the same. And if to him by whom much had been done, much had also been given to enable him to do it; while to him whose labour was less arduous, less had been given to qualify him for the performance of it; no rule of equity could be violated by an equal requital of service. Perhaps, too, our Lord intended to admonish the Apostles, and, through them, the Christian world at large, that it is not in any case for man to claim, on the score of *merit*, a recompense beyond that which God hath covenanted to bestow. In this respect, both Jews and Gentiles, and all, as many as were called to the profession of the Gospel, stood on equal ground. None had whereof to boast before God. "For all had sinned, "and come short of the glory of God; being "justified freely by His grace, through the

“redemption that is in Christ Jesus^f.” All, even in obeying the Gospel, were so far “unprofitable servants,” in that they had done no more than it was their duty to do.

It also behoved the Apostles to know (as a salutary antidote to any ambitious views they might entertain) that their station was one of no ordinary *responsibility*; and that, notwithstanding its high eminence, (the highest, perhaps, that ever was filled by man,) it was possible for them to *fall away*, and to forfeit that recompense of which they were otherwise assured. Our Lord elsewhere admonishes them, that many, at the day of judgment, would say unto him, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name cast out devils, and done many wondrous works? Then will I say unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye workers of iniquity^g.” Thus in another sense, “the last might be first, and the first last.” Even an Apostle might become a cast-away; and an unbeliever be converted to an Apostle. And to shew that it was no light hazard, to which they, as well as others, were exposed; it is added, “*For many be called, but few chosen.*” To Christians in general, it is not enough to have had the offer

^f Rom. iii. 23, 24.

^g Matth. viii. 22, 23.

of the Gospel made and accepted, or to have been brought into the visible church of God, unless all diligence be given to make their calling and election sure; and how many may hereafter be found to have failed in this respect were a fearful subject of inquiry. But to the Apostles more especially, who betrayed so strong a desire to be regarded as *chosen* in a still higher sense; to become entitled to distinction and preeminence in their Lord's kingdom, this warning was necessary, that they might suffer no false notions of self-importance to interfere with the arduous work to which they were called. Our Lord, therefore, solicitous to check this rising spirit of ambition, says, in a subsequent part of this same discourse, "Whosoever will be great
" among you, let him be your minister: and
" whosoever will be chief among you, let him
" be your servant^h:"—which still further elucidates the saying, "the last shall be first,
" and the first last."

There are yet other points of instruction to be drawn from this parable, which must not pass entirely unnoticed.

One design of it might be, to teach us that we are not to set up ourselves as competent judges of the Divine proceedings, either with

^h Matth. xx. 26, 27.

regard to the times and seasons of spreading the Gospel, “which the Father hath put in “his own powerⁱ ;” or with regard to the comparative deserts of individuals, and the measure of recompense which God may see fit hereafter to confer upon them. These are matters beyond the reach of human judgment. The general terms of the Christian covenant are clear and decisive ; and the general recompense which awaits all who shall fulfil those terms cannot be mistaken. The general fitness also of the several dispensations of revealed religion to the times and occasions in which they took place, may without much difficulty be perceived. But the appointment of special rewards to those who lived under one dispensation rather than another, or to different individuals living under the same dispensation, none but the all-seeing Judge can be competent to determine. The prophet shall have a prophet’s reward ; the righteous man, a righteous man’s reward. Some may be made rulers over ten cities ; some, over five. And he that giveth a cup of water only in the name of a disciple shall in no wise lose *his* reward. But the adjustment of these matters is not within *our* province. *At present* it is wholly concealed

ⁱ Acts i. 7.

from our view; and we are enjoined to “judge
 “ nothing before the time, until the Lord
 “ come, who both will bring to light the
 “ hidden things of darkness, and will make
 “ manifest the counsels of the hearts; and
 “ then shall every man have praise of God^k.”
 Nor does it concern any individual to know
 what degree of recompense *others* may obtain.
 It is sufficient that he is instructed how he
 himself may obtain an heavenly inheritance:
 and if he inquisitively ask, “ Lord, and what
 “ shall *this* man do?” he must expect the
 answer, “ What is that to thee? Follow thou
 “ me^l.”

The parable, however, incidentally suggests, that God never has, nor ever will be, in any period of the church, wanting, either to mankind at large, or to individuals, in providing for the spiritual exigencies of such as are willing to enter into his service. Both before and since the Christian revelation was vouchsafed, his good providence has been ever watchful to renew the call to mankind, by chosen messengers of his will, as occasion might require. Among the *patriarchs* were preachers of righteousness, who rejoiced themselves, and taught others to rejoice in the expectation of the Redeemer. The Di-

^k 1 Cor. iv. 5.

^l John xxi. 22.

vine legation of *Moses* was followed by a succession of *prophets* for the same purpose. Under the *Christian* dispensation, “He gave
“some, *Apostles*, and some, *prophets*, and
“some, *evangelists*, and some, *pastors* and
“*teachers*; for the perfecting of the saints,
“for the work of the ministry, for the edi-
“fying of the body of Christ^m.” And from
thence to the present time, let the history
of the church testify how many illustrious
champions of the faith, how many faithful
and indefatigable labourers in the vineyard,
have been raised up, making full proof of
their ministry, in the most difficult times
and under circumstances the most discouraging.

One more observation arises from this view of the parable. The cultivation of the vineyard was intrusted, not to labourers intruding into the service without authority from their Lord, but to such as were duly *called* and *appointed* to perform the work. The sacred office of the ministry is not, therefore, to be usurped by bold and confident men, assuming to themselves pretensions of which they can give no satisfactory *external* evidence. “No man,” says the Apostle, “taketh
“this honour unto himself, but he that is

^m Ephes. iv. 11, 12.

“ called of God, as was *Aaron*ⁿ ;” who had an authoritative commission evidenced by outward tokens. Nor is it difficult to know, under the Christian dispensation, what those tokens should be. Our Lord ordained his Apostles. The Apostles ordained others, with powers to ordain likewise; and thus provision was made for perpetuating the ministerial office according to the will of its heavenly Founder. This, then, is a visible, a standing evidence of the call which is necessary to warrant the assumption of the office: and most fearful is the responsibility which is incurred by those who assume it without full conviction of being thus duly authorized. The fancied good to be derived from infringing on this rule will be greatly overbalanced by the evil of irregularity and confusion: and the history of the church affords convincing proof that the labour thus expended will generally be of unsuccessful issue.

The parable has thus been shewn, I trust, to abound with important instruction, and to be clogged with no insuperable difficulties. Though it arose out of circumstances relating to the Apostles only; yet it is couched in terms which give it a much more exten-

ⁿ Hebr. v. 4.

sive application. It was calculated to repress any aspiring or ambitious views to which the peculiar situation of the Apostles rendered them liable ; and to abate the force of those national prejudices which indisposed them to the enlarged views of the Gospel dispensation. It admonished them not to presume upon their high functions and privileges, to the disparagement of the labours of others ; not to be “ high-minded, but to fear^o,” lest they themselves should fall short of their expected recompense ; not to advance claims founded on their own merits, or on the value of their services, but to remember that their sufficiency was of God, and that it was of His free grace and mercy that they were called to this state of salvation themselves, and made instruments of calling others. It taught them also to beware of measuring the justice of the Divine dispensations by the standard of their own imperfect conceptions ; to be careful in securing their own reward, without grudging a reward to any man ; to trust in God for all needful helps to carry on and perpetuate the work he had begun in them ; and to rely on the efficacy of his ordinances and appointments for producing the intended result.

^o Rom. xi. 20.

In these instructions *we* also have an evident interest. A salutary reproof is given to all who are disposed to vaunt themselves on their spiritual privileges, or their superior merits; to all who “trust in themselves that they are righteous, and despise others;” to all who would limit the mercies of God to the narrow views of party spirit. Encouragement is also given, not only to the Christian ministry, but to every faithful disciple of his Lord, to labour diligently in his vocation, and to work the work of Him that sent him, whatever it may be. For of this may every one be assured, that whether he fill one station or another; whether he be sooner or later called to it; whether he have a greater or a less burden to sustain; God, who is no hard taskmaster, will vouchsafe sufficiency of ability for the purpose; and at the great day of account, every one who hath made a right use of his talents shall receive that sentence, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord^p.”

^p Matth. xxv. 21.

SERMON VIII.

LUKE xv. 7.

I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

IN contemplating the characteristic features of the Christian religion, it is difficult to say which is more conspicuous, the perfect purity of its precepts, or the merciful provision that it makes for those by whom they are transgressed. In both respects, it as far transcends every other religion that can be put in competition with it, as *infinite* wisdom or goodness transcends that which is the result of only *human* powers. And the union of these excellencies is the more worthy of our admiration, since in *our own* endeavours after perfection, nothing is more embarrassing than to know how to reconcile the moral *purity* of any system, with the exercise of *lenity* towards those who offend

against its laws; or how to give full extent to claims of mercy and forbearance, without detracting from the spotless character of perfect virtue.

Such, however, is the perverseness or the infirmity of our nature, that too often these very perfections and excellencies of the Christian system are made the occasion of dangerous errors. Partial views are taken of it, according to the different habits and sentiments of those by whom it is examined. Expedients are devised for adapting it to acquired prejudices, to corrupt affections, or to fanciful theories. Nor have such perversions been confined to secondary and subordinate points only, but even to such as vitally affect the fundamental principles of the faith we profess.

This is strikingly exemplified in the different representations which have been given of the *terms* and *conditions* of our acceptance, under the Christian dispensation. *Faith* and *works* have been set at variance with each other. *Sinless perfection* has by some been regarded as *necessary to salvation*; while others seem to think that no moral attainments whatever can avail any thing; that provided there be a strong and undoubting *reliance* upon the merits of the Redeemer,

the salvation of the most profligate sinner is no less secure than that of him who is constantly solicitous to make his ways and his doings good. Others rely so entirely upon *themselves* for their sufficiency to perform their duty, as hardly to suspect that they are in any degree *sinner*s before God, or stand in need of repentance and forgiveness.

This last persuasion appears to have been strongly rooted in the minds of the Jewish Pharisees. Entirely devoted to the forms and ordinances of religion, and punctilious in their observance of whatever could give them a reputation of sanctity among the people; they seem to have conceived opinions of themselves correspondent with that blind veneration in which they were held by the multitude. Their haughty deportment, and the very name they assumed to distinguish them from the general mass of Jewish believers, betrayed a spirit very repugnant to that of the Gospel. Hence they cast it as a reproach upon the purity of our Lord's character, that he conversed with publicans and sinners; and they treated him with rage and scorn, when he preached remission of sins, and encouraged the penitent with an assurance of pardon and peace. According to their conceptions of religion, it

might be supposed that mankind were divisible into two classes only; the righteous, who needed no repentance, and sinners, to whom repentance could be of no avail. To themselves they applied the former character; and in the other they appear to have included all who did not lay claim to such an imaginary perfection. “They trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others^a.” Many of our Lord’s discourses were directed to the reproof of this powerful sect; nor did he fail to take every opportunity of repelling their uncharitable censures, when they presumed to cavil at that dispensation of grace and mercy which he came to proclaim to a sinful world.

The parable of the *lost sheep* was delivered on an occasion of this kind. “Then drew near unto him,” says the Evangelist, “all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and Scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath

^a Luke xviii. 9.

“ found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me ; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance.” To this parable is subjoined the similar one of the *lost piece of money* : and this again is followed by that of the *prodigal son*. The tendency of all the three is to encourage sinners to repentance, and to shew that the great design of our Lord’s coming into the world was “ to seek and to save that which was lost.”

In that which is now to be considered, there are some points, however, which require caution in the application of them ; lest we fall into errors different, perhaps, from those of the Pharisees, but no less irreconcilable with the pure system of the Gospel.

These points may be reduced to three questions:—1st, Who are to be understood by the “ *ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance ?*” 2dly, What is meant by the owner of the sheep “ *going after that which is lost, till he find it ?*” 3dly, What are we to understand by there being *more joy over*

a repentant sinner, than over those who need no repentance?

1. First, then, who are to be understood by the “*ninety and nine just persons, who need no repentance?*”

In strictness of speech, *no such persons* are to be found. The Scripture expressly declares, that “*all have sinned and come short of the glory of God:*” and every one has reason to say, with Job, “*If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me; if I say, I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse^b.*” But the expression may be considered either as ironically glancing at the arrogance of the Pharisees; or, as denoting persons who are really such proficient in holiness and virtue, and so blameless in their conduct, as not to stand in need of those *extraordinary* calls to penitence and conversion which are rendered necessary by long-continued habits of departure from God.

Taken in the former sense, the expressions very aptly describe, not what the Pharisees *really were*, but what they *affected to be*; “*just persons, who needed no repentance:*”—persons, who “*thanked God that they were not as other men are^c* ;” ready on every occasion “*to justify themselves,*” as if no charge

^b Job ix. 20.

^c Luke xviii. 14.

could be brought against them ; professing extraordinary strictness and sanctity of character, but instead of “ *bringing forth fruits meet for repentance,*” thinking it sufficient to “ *say within themselves, that they had Abraham to their father*^d,” and were consequently numbered among the *chosen* people of God.

But there seems to be no substantial reason, why the words should not be interpreted in their more obvious signification, to denote persons sincerely endeavouring to attain to that perfection which Christianity requires:—persons, “ *brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,*” and, by God’s grace, continuing steadfast in his faith and fear. Of such persons, though it cannot be affirmed that they are exempt from sin, or from the danger of falling away, yet it may not untruly be said, that they are not “ *servants of sin* ;” that they do not wilfully and obstinately transgress the Divine laws ; and therefore that they stand in a very different predicament from such as follow their own perverse imaginations, and are regardless of their Christian calling.

There appears indeed to be no foundation for the notion which some have entertained,

^d Matth. iii. 9.

that every man, however regular and unoffending in his ordinary course of conduct, must, at some period of his life, undergo certain violent emotions and even agonizing convictions of sin, filling him with dread and horror of his condition, before he can be converted and live. For, if it be true that such conversion as this is necessary in *every* case, where would be the distinction between the *lost sheep* and those which still remained *in the fold*? It is true, indeed, that to a great extent, “*all* we like sheep have gone astray, “and have turned every one to his own “way^e ;” so that *repentance* is continually necessary to *all*. But those whom our Lord here characterizes as *lost sheep*, appear to be such as have entirely abandoned the way of truth and righteousness, and who require some *extraordinary* means of grace to reclaim them from their evil ways. To this latter description of persons the term *conversion* most properly applies ; and not to those whose habitual course of life may warrant us in saying that they “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith they are called^f ; giving “all diligence to make their calling and election sure^g.”

But, secondly, let us consider the next

^e Isaiah liii. 6.

^f Ephes. iv. 1.

^g 2 Peter i. 10.

question arising out of the parable ;—What is meant by the owner of the sheep “*going after that which is lost, until he find it?*”

Some conceive that the number of persons to be saved through Christ is limited to certain favoured individuals, preordained to eternal life by an absolute decree of God. According to this theory, all mankind are supposed to be irretrievably lost except these chosen few ; and with regard to *these*, it is presumed that *they* shall *certainly* at some time or other be called and converted by God’s special grace, which will overcome all difficulties by its sovereign and irresistible power. In confirmation of which opinion, the expression in the parable, “*leaving the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and going after that which is lost, until he find it,*” is considered to be a significant intimation.

There are circumstances, however, in the parable itself, which strongly militate against any such interpretation. The ninety and nine evidently represent those who have *not* wandered from the fold, and who are, therefore, not in a *lost* condition, but hear the voice of the great Shepherd and are obedient to his word. To these, therefore, the *ordinary* means provided for their safety and support are supposed to be sufficient. But

it is not so with those who have departed from their heavenly Guide, and are estranged from his counsel and his protection. These are exposed to innumerable dangers from their own heedless or perverse inclinations, and from enemies which beset them on every side. Their destruction indeed is inevitable, unless the goodness of God lead them to repentance by some *extraordinary* act of mercy. And since it is not the will of our heavenly Father “that any should perish, but that all “should come to repentance^h,” this merciful disposition is described by his “*going after that which is lost until he find it* ;” and, in the parable of the lost piece of money, by “*seeking diligently till it is found*.” These expressions strongly characterize the infinite compassion of God towards sinners, and his earnest desire to recover them from their evil ways. But to infer that even these methods of God’s grace will in any case be *necessarily* and *irresistibly* effectual, is to suppose man to have no will or power of his own ; and to be incapable either of a *concurrent* or an *opponent* operation in this great concern. It is also holding out an expectation even to the most inveterate offenders, that the Spirit of God will still continue to strive with

^h 2 Peter iii. 9.

them, and in due time subdue their stubborn hearts, and bring back their affections to God, however hardened they may be. But what then becomes of that awful warning of the Almighty, “Because I have called, and “ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, “and no man regarded; but *ye have set at* “*nought* all my counsel, and would none of “my reproof; I also will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear comethⁱ?” Or how shall we understand that exhortation of our blessed Lord to the Jews, “*Ye* “*will not* come unto me, that ye may have “life^k ;” and his affecting complaint that he “would have gathered them together even as “a hen gathereth her chickens under her “wing, but *they would not*^l?” Do not such passages (and they abound in the sacred writings) plainly intimate, that the means which God graciously vouchsafes for the conversion of the wicked are *not* always effectual;—and that when they are not so, the failure is to be ascribed solely to the abuse of men’s own liberty?

Our Lord’s intention, then, in this parable, can only be to give the strongest assurance that pardon is never unattainable, while there is space for repentance. His design was to

ⁱ Prov. i. 26.

^k John v. 40.

^l Matth. xxiii. 37.

warn the proud and self-righteous Pharisees, that even publicans and sinners might find admission into his kingdom more readily than they themselves; since “every one that
“exalteth himself shall be abased, but he
“that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” It was to assure the penitent and contrite in all ages, that “them who come unto Him
“he will in no wise cast out^m ;” and to shew that his mercies fail not even towards those whose condition appears to be lost and irrecoverable, if they will receive those overtures of mercy and peace which the Gospel makes known. It was to give additional encouragement to a ready acceptance of these overtures, by representing the joy in heaven over persons so recovered, to be even greater than over those whose faith and practice had been more uniformly irreproachable.

3. But what are we to understand by there being “*more joy*” over a repentant sinner, than over those who do not “*need such repentance?*”—This was the last point proposed for our consideration.

The joy here spoken of is that which men are wont to express on the occurrence of some *unexpected* and *improbable* event; a joy of *surprise*, as well as of complacency

^m John vi. 37.

and satisfaction. Speaking after the manner of human affections, and in a way adapted to ordinary apprehensions, our Lord represents the recovery of a repentant sinner as producing *extraordinary* emotions of delight. It is the delight of benevolent beings of a higher order than our own, nay, of the supreme Being himself, on the escape of the sinner from destruction ; on the proof that the grace of God, vouchsafed for that purpose, has not been bestowed in vain.

Contemplating the subject in this point of view, it seems hardly possible we should so misapprehend our Lord's meaning, as to infer that any *preference* is hereby given to a late, however sincere, repentance or conversion from a wicked course of life, when put in comparison with a generally blameless tenor of conduct, carried on with little interruption or deviation, from the first entrance upon the Christian life to its happy termination. The very reverse of this would be the more proper and natural inference. For if this greater degree of rejoicing arises from the *improbable* and *unexpected* nature of the occurrence, it is implied that such a recovery from a state of sin is at best a *difficult* and a *doubtful* work. To suppose that the recovery from such a state is preferable to a state of

comparative *innocence*, is something like supposing that recovery from a dangerous bodily disease is more desirable than a course of uninterrupted health, because it usually excites more lively emotions of delight. As well also might we infer that the owner of the lost sheep in the parable set a greater actual value upon *that one*, than upon his *whole flock* besides ; or that a piece of money which has been lost, and found again, will from that circumstance pass current for a higher price than nine other pieces of the same kind still remaining in our possession.

It is a dangerous notion also which some have ventured to inculcate, that higher degrees of holiness and greater experimental assurance of the Divine favour are attainable by those who have been converted from a reprobate course of life, than by sober and vigilant Christians, whose consciences have not undergone such keen convictions of remorse. True it is, that greater degrees of grace may be conceived necessary in such cases, to arouse the sinner to a sense of his danger ; and greater efforts also on his own part in answering the awakening call. And when the arduous work of reformation has been thus effected, correspondent feelings of gratitude, of faith, of humility, and of every pious

affection towards his heavenly Benefactor and Deliverer, may reasonably be expected to abound within him. Nor is it improbable, that the very wretchedness occasioned by a heavy pressure of guilt upon the conscience may contribute, by the blessing of God, to make a man feel, what he would not otherwise be brought to feel, the necessity of an all-powerful atonement for his offences, and of strong supplications to the throne of grace for intercession and acceptance. It is also probable, on the other hand, that where this painful stimulus is wanting, and where, with fewer deviations from rectitude, and fewer temptations to sin, a smooth and equable practice of religion has been long maintained, the strong and ardent feelings of the mind will be less powerfully excited.

But it will always be hazardous to make our internal *feelings* on such a subject the *criterion* of our spiritual condition. That agitation and perturbation of mind which may be necessary to awaken a careless or a stubborn offender to a sense of his danger, cannot be equally so to preserve the faithful Christian in the ordinary and regular discharge of his duty. Nor need the pure and peaceful serenity of him who is going on progressively from strength to strength, and

daily enjoying “the testimony of his conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, he has had his conversation with the worldⁿ,” be required to give way to such transports of mind as affect those who had hitherto been strangers to the comforts of practical religion.

Our surest mode, then, of turning this whole subject to our profit, is to understand the parable as intended to reprove Pharisaical pride and hypocrisy, and to encourage such as are of an humble and contrite spirit;—to hold out consolation and hope even to the worst of sinners, by shewing that the way to life is still open through penitence and faith; but to admonish them, at the same time, that without such a return to duty they are in a lost and desperate condition;—to be a warning also to every one “*who thinketh he standeth*,”—(to every one who, presuming on his hitherto upright conduct, neither fears danger nor provides against it,)—to “*take heed lest he fall*°;” to beware lest that very security should prove his ruin; lest, vainly imagining that he “needs no repentance,” he forget that he is to “work out his salvation *with fear and trem-*

ⁿ 2 Cor. i. 12.

° 1 Cor. x. 12.

“*bling*^p ;”—to remind us also that the preventing as well as co-operating grace of the Holy Spirit is indispensably requisite, both for those who would persevere in well-doing, and for those who have erred and strayed from the path of life ; and above all, to incite us to reflect with love and gratitude, with devout affection of heart and soul, upon that unbounded compassion, that unceasing solicitude of the “good Shepherd himself,” the gracious and all-powerful Redeemer, who hath purchased these blessings for us, and who is ever ready to embrace with the arms of his mercy the penitent and contrite sinner.

On all these points the parable throws abundant light. *Why* is the joy so great “over one sinner that repenteth ;” but because the difficulty of breaking off inveterate habits, and returning to newness of life, is great beyond all the efforts necessary to persevere in an habitual course of piety and virtue ? And why are we obliged to caution those who comparatively may be thought to “need no repentance,” or may too fondly imagine that they need none ; but because that very persuasion is too apt to engender pride and self-sufficiency, to foster a censo-

rious and uncharitable spirit, to make men forgetful of their own infirmities, of the infirmities of others, and of the help of which we all stand in need, to enable us to accomplish our Christian warfare? Why also is our merciful Saviour represented as thus watchful over us for our good, but that his goodness may lead us to repentance, and encourage us to return to HIM who will “abundantly pardon^a?”

Without doubting, therefore, that even such an imperfect course of *innocence* as frail mortality can hope to attain to, is far preferable in the sight of God to such a *contrary* course as requires more than ordinary resolution, or more than ordinary help from above, to escape from its dreadful consequences; let us still bear in mind what we owe, in either case, to ourselves and others. If we have hitherto, by God’s blessing on our endeavours, been enabled to continue in his faith and fear; let us give God the glory, and with humility and caution persevere in the same paths, and walk therein, that we may “find rest to our souls;” nor let us with rash and supercilious judgment regard those as unworthy of our charitable help and commiseration, who are unhappily plunged in

^a Isaiah lv. 7.

depths of guilt from which we ourselves have been graciously preserved. Doubtless, great are the advantages of *early piety* ; and we can never be too thankful for them, if such has been our own favoured lot. But in proportion to our just sense of the value of such advantages, should be our tenderness and solicitude for those who have had them not. We are taught by our great Exemplar, not to “ *bruise the broken reed, nor quench the smoking flax*.” Where the spark of vital goodness appears not to be quite extinct, where the mind seems yet to feel humiliation and contrition under the consciousness of guilt ; it is not for us to throw impediments in the way of recovery. Rather should every effort be made, not only “ to strengthen such as do stand ;” but “ to comfort and help the weak-hearted, and to raise up them that fall ;” that by God’s grace they may at last be enabled “ to beat down Satan under their feet.”

Thus both to them that are *fallen*, and to them that stand *upright*, the promises of God may be made of full effect. *Joy* may await them both ;—joy to the *penitent convert* ; joy to the *faithful and persevering Christian* : the *former* having at last “ known the things

“ which belong unto his peace, before they
“ were for ever hid from his eyes^s;”—the
latter having earlier chosen “ that good part
“ which shall not be taken away from him^t;”
steadfastly resolved to “ keep innocency, and
“ take heed unto the thing that is right,”
knowing that “ *that shall bring a man peace at*
“ *the last*^v.”

^s Luke xix. 42.

^t Luke x. 42.

^v Psalm lv. 7.

SERMON IX.

LUKE xvi. 8, 9.

And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.

THE parable of the unjust steward is generally considered to be of difficult interpretation, and has given occasion to frequent obloquy among sceptical writers. Much of the difficulty, however, may be removed by inquiry into the occasion on which it was delivered, and by carefully comparing the expressions contained in the parable, with the observations grounded upon it by our Lord himself; observations, which afford the only certain clue to its real intent, and effectually preclude any misconstruction to which it might otherwise be liable.

The persons to whom it appears to have

been more immediately addressed were the Pharisees ; “ who,” says the Evangelist, “ were “ covetous,” and “ when they heard all these “ things,” (that is, the parable, and our Lord’s observations upon it,) “ derided him ^a.” They were conscious, probably, that it was directed against *them* in particular, as persons intent upon “ laying up for themselves treasures “ upon earth,” and regardless of those “ treasures in heaven,” which our Lord had emphatically exhorted *his* disciples to be chiefly desirous of obtaining. In the character of the unjust steward is portrayed a man of a worldly spirit, unrestrained by any sense of duty in the pursuit of temporal gain, trusting in uncertain riches, and bent upon securing to himself present enjoyment, at whatever sacrifice of integrity. That such persons could not become *His* faithful disciples, nor steadfastly adhere to *Him* as their Lord and Master, is a lesson distinctly conveyed in the parable, which the Pharisees could hardly fail to discern.

When, therefore, it is said that “ the lord ” — not our blessed Saviour himself, but the lord, or rich man, in the parable — “ *commended* the unjust steward, because he had

^a Luke xvi. 14.

“done *wisely* :” the question immediately presents itself, *What* was this commendation, and *what* was this wisdom? Was the commendation serious, or ironical? Was the wisdom delusive, or real? Now, the commendation itself being applied to the very person whom his lord had just dismissed for his unfaithful conduct as a steward, can hardly convey any other meaning than that of a sarcastic admiration of the man’s shrewdness and sagacity in providing against immediate ruin, though by an act of dishonesty greatly aggravating his previous offence. For the same reason, the expression, that “he had done *wisely*,” can mean nothing more than that he had shewn much ingenuity and forecast, in securing to himself a reception among those who were to become partners in his iniquity, on his dismissal from the service of his lord. This is confirmed also by our Lord’s observation, that “the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.” The children of this world are they whose hopes and expectations are limited to this present life, and extend no further. The children of light are they who look forward to a future state of eternal reward or punishment, as the main object of regard. The unjust steward was one of the former descrip-

tion, and acted “wisely in his generation,” conformably with his own sordid views and principles, in securing to himself the possession of that mammon, which, whether justly or unjustly acquired, had entirely engrossed his affections. Covertly also, our Lord might intend to glance at the Pharisees, as “children of this world ;” who, similarly “wise in their generation,” rejected HIM, when they found that his kingdom was not of this world, nor did he come to bestow temporal honours and emoluments, but forewarned his disciples that through much tribulation they must enter into the kingdom of heaven. So long as this disposition predominated among them, they could not become his faithful followers ; and they acted consistently, in seeking every opportunity to thwart his purpose, in heaping injuries upon him, and leaguings with others to bring his ministry into contempt.

But our Lord subjoins to this observation an exhortation of more general importance, and such as gives to the main incident in the parable a weight and significance peculiarly characteristic of his mode of communicating spiritual instruction :—“ And I say
“ unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the
“ mammon of unrighteousness, that when ye
“ fail, they may receive you into *everlasting*

“habitations.” Here the contrast is strongly marked between the commendation given to the unjust steward, and that which will be bestowed hereafter upon the just and faithful at the tribunal of their eternal and omniscient Judge. The policy of the former is nevertheless still kept in view, as the groundwork of the admonition engrafted upon the parable; that policy being more or less exemplified in all who concern themselves only with the things of this present life. If they fail in one respect, they endeavour to secure their object in some other way, and are fertile in expedients for the attainment of the end in view. This end they steadfastly pursue; and seldom are induced by difficulties, or even by disappointments, to abandon it; but persevere in their course with unabated ardour. Hence our Lord takes occasion to shew the advantage that might be derived by persons of a better disposition, from being no less sedulous in the pursuit of spiritual and everlasting treasures, than worldly men usually are in the pursuit of such as are precarious in their tenure, perishable in their nature, and comparatively of short and momentary duration;—the whole force of which admonition consists in contrasting *temporal* with *eternal* possessions, and the means ne-

cessary for the attainment of the one, with those too commonly resorted to for the acquisition of the other.

This explains also those remarkable expressions applied by our Lord to worldly riches, “the mammon of unrighteousness,” and “the unrighteous mammon:”—expressions which, though they seem to have reference only to *ill-gotten* wealth,—(wealth acquired by such means as were resorted to by the steward in the parable,)—must, in order to render them consistent with our Lord’s concluding exhortation, be understood of wealth *in general*, however unblameably acquired. The original word here rendered *unrighteous* is, indeed, not unfrequently used to denote what is merely *delusive* or *deceitful*, in opposition to what is substantial and true. “If ye have not been faithful,” says our Lord, “in the *unrighteous* mammon, who “will commit to your trust the *true* riches?” evidently denoting the *transitory* nature of all worldly substance, as opposed to the *never-failing* possessions of our heavenly inheritance. In like manner to “make to ourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness,” cannot mean to make a wise use of wealth *unjustly* acquired;—(for, surely no wealth *so* acquired can bring a blessing

upon its possessor ;)—but to make such an use of that which is fleeting and temporary, as may ensure to us a recompense perfect and imperishable.

The instruction, then, to be deduced from the parable appears to be simply this :—first, that we should learn wisdom in our *spiritual* concerns from observing the diligence and sagacity of worldly men in their *temporal* pursuits ;—secondly, that we should strive to render even our *temporal* possessions instrumental to the acquisition of better and more lasting enjoyments in the world to come.

Respecting the first of these useful lessons, we must have lived to little purpose, or have been strangely defective in our observation of human character, if we cannot turn it to good account. On viewing the activity, solicitude, and perseverance, with which multitudes engage in the interests of this present life, we might be led to suppose that those interests are such as neither time nor accident can destroy, and such as must infallibly reward their possessors with unalloyed enjoyments. For not only do they “ rise early, “ and late take rest, and eat the bread of “ carefulness ;” but they will resolutely perform many an act of rigid self-denial, and suffer many a painful mortification, in the

eagerness of their pursuit. See the *avaricious* man abstaining from the conveniencies and comforts, nay, almost from the necessities of life:—the *ambitious* imposing upon himself toil, and servitude, and vexations, which, if imposed upon him by others, or for any other purpose, he would deem intolerable hardships:—the *libertine* sacrificing health and wealth, reputation and honour, to the lowest sensual gratifications. Or, without putting extreme cases, what is there which, in the ordinary course of human life, men will not occasionally undergo, for the sake of some addition to their substance, some favourite self-indulgence, some envied distinction among mankind? Is it not, indeed, rare to meet with any person who does not willingly forego a considerable portion of his personal ease and comfort for the acquisition of a particular object on which his hopes and affections are most intensely fixed? This is what is properly called *worldly wisdom*; and they who act thus, are said to be “wise in their generation,” because they do that which every wise man would do, supposing this world to be the only proper object of his concern, and supposing that he had made choice of those pursuits which promise the most certain, the most ample, and the most permanent gratifi-

cation. For, unquestionably, if there were no necessity for taking a *future state* into account, we might reasonably deem them to be the wisest of mankind who laboured most, at whatever cost or hazard, to outstrip their competitors in the race of worldly preeminence, worldly profit, worldly pleasure, or whatever other temporal good they most affected.

In this respect, then, (that is, in their zeal, assiduity, and unremitting exertion,) the children of this world may be held up as examples to the children of light. If the former are wise in their generation, let the latter be equally so in theirs. Let them who are fully persuaded of the great and incontrovertible truths declared in the revealed word of God, who acknowledge one heavenly Lord and Master whom they are bound to serve and obey, and who look to another world for their full and final recompense, be as diligent in securing to themselves treasures undecaying and eternal, as others are in chasing those which continually elude their grasp, or if obtained, must quickly fade away and perish.

But is this actually the case? Do we perceive in general the same degree of wisdom among those who profess to be “children of

“light;” and will their conduct abide this simple test? The comparison is easily made. An intelligent man of the world does not expect to succeed in what he aims at, without due exercise of all his means and appliances. He considers beforehand what he has to do, and how it is to be effected. He is wary and circumspect in laying his plans, anticipates difficulties, and provides for their removal. He associates with those who may best promote his views, calls in their help and acts in union and co-operation with them. On the other hand, how often do Christians fail, from the want of a disposition to profit by these lessons! How often are they betrayed into habits of life inconsistent with their acknowledged principles! How often do they forfeit the fairest prospects of success, by not persevering to the end; or bring discredit upon themselves, and upon religion itself, by their lukewarmness, their want of energy and decision, their disinclination to take counsel or seek assistance from those who would strengthen them in their good resolutions, and forward them in the great purpose they profess to have taken in hand.

Let it not, however, be regarded as any injurious reflection upon religion itself, that

the children of this world are thus represented to be wiser in their generation than the children of light. They are wiser *only in their generation*; wiser in acting as it would be wisdom to act, *if their views and principles were just*. But those views and principles being altogether erroneous and illusive, their conduct, notwithstanding this seeming wisdom, is in truth but folly. The children of light, if they be truly such and act accordingly, are alone to be esteemed really wise. *They* alone have an assurance that can never fail. *They* alone are “wise unto salvation.” *They* alone have the “joy” that “no man taketh from them^b.” “Not as the world giveth,” said our blessed Lord to his disciples, “give I unto you^c.” The world may promise largely, and hold out fascinating expectations: but there is no real wisdom, goodness, or happiness, in opposition to the will of God.

Yet, lest it should be hence inferred that we must renounce all intercourse with the world, and regard its possessions as altogether incompatible with religious conduct, we are, secondly, admonished both of the possibility and the duty of rendering such possessions instrumental to the acquisition of better and

^b John xvi. 22.

^c John xiv. 27.

more lasting treasures in the world to come;—
“ Make to yourselves friends of the mammon
“ of unrighteousness, that, when ye fail, they
“ may receive you into everlasting habita-
“ tions.”

No truth is more indisputable, than that every thing we possess in this world originates in the free and spontaneous bounty of Almighty God. “ Every good gift and
“ every perfect gift is from above, and cometh
“ down from the Father of lights^d ;” and this is equally true of temporal as of spiritual blessings. With respect to all these, we are *stewards* only, intrusted with them for wise and beneficent purposes, and responsible for their use or abuse to their great Author and Giver. Strictly speaking, we are hardly warranted in calling any temporal possessions *our own*. Most certainly, they are not so with respect to the Supreme Being, subject to whose will every one must of necessity hold them. Neither are they so far our own, even with respect to our fellow-creatures, as to justify us in withholding good from others when it is in our power to bestow it, or in making our own personal interest the sole rule of our conduct. “ None of us,” says St. Paul, “ liveth unto himself^e.” “ Let no

^d James i. 17.

^e Rom. xiv. 7.

“man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth^f.” To misapply the gifts and talents we have received, to divert them to other purposes than those for which they were bestowed, to neglect the improvement and cultivation of them to the honour of God and the good of mankind, is to incur the guilt of *unjust stewardship*, forfeiting the Divine favour, and rendering ourselves chargeable with the twofold offence of ingratitude and disobedience. This indeed constitutes one essential difference between the children of this world and the children of light, that the former consider not from *Whom* they have received what they possess, or to *Whom* they are responsible for its application; the latter bear in mind the *trust* committed to them, and remember that they must “give account of their stewardship,” and of the care and fidelity with which it has been discharged.

All are alike interested in *this* view of the parable before us. All are hereby admonished that if they use their talents or possessions unworthily, they are liable to be accused, as the unjust steward was, of “wasting their Lord’s goods.” Other admonitions from the same heavenly Teacher speak to the

^f 1 Cor. x. 24.

same effect. The parable of the Talents holds out a warning, that even the unprofitable servant shall not escape condemnation. That of the Rich Man and Lazarus teaches the danger of abusing our possessions to the purposes of luxury, vanity, and ostentation, without regard to a future state of retribution. That of the Rich Fool, who doted upon his wealth, saying, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry," fearfully reminds us that God may cut short such boasting and self-confidence by a momentary summons to appear at his dread tribunal: "So," adds our blessed Saviour, "is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God^s." The instruction to be drawn from all these parables coincides with the lesson our Lord deduces from that of the unjust steward, as to the spiritual use to be made of our temporal possessions, and the account that must be rendered of them hereafter.

How earnestly our blessed Saviour inculcated these truths upon his hearers in general, as well as upon the Pharisees in particular, is sufficiently evident from his depicting the evils of a worldly spirit in such a variety of affecting representations. Still more ex-

^s Luke xii. 19, 20, 21.

pressly is this declared, in that exhortation, “Take heed and beware of covetousness: for
 “a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance
 “of the things which he possesseth^h.”—
 “They that will be rich,” says St. Paul, “fall
 “into temptation and a snare, and into many
 “foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men
 “in destruction and perditionⁱ,” and the
 same view of the too frequently pernicious
 influence of wealth upon the heart led our
 Lord to say, “How hardly shall they that
 “have riches enter into the kingdom of
 “God^k!” Not that wealth necessarily hardens
 the heart against the calls of religion, or
 blinds the understanding to its truths; but
 that when pursued without reference to the
 deep responsibility it necessarily involves,
 it has a direct tendency to absorb the
 affections, and to alienate the mind from
 higher and nobler objects. And this, let it
 be observed, is equally the case, whatever
 be the disposition of its possessor in other
 respects. Covetousness, in its largest and
 most comprehensive signification, applies not
 only to the sordid accumulation of wealth for
 its own sake, and without any view to further
 gratification; but also to the eager desire of
 those who would add to their possessions for

^h Luke xii. 15.

ⁱ 1 Tim. vi. 9.

^k Mark x. 23.

the purpose of consuming it upon their lusts, or for any other selfish gratification. The voluptuary and the miser stand in this respect upon the same footing, as implicated in the guilt of covetousness; nor are even they entirely clear of it who make wealth the mere instrument of arrogant and ambitious display. In every case where it is made to minister only to worldly views, and is disconnected from all *religious* considerations of its use and value, it becomes a fatal snare. Against this perversion of what might otherwise prove a real blessing, all these admonitions of our Lord, and that especially in the parable before us, are evidently directed. At the same time, the mode is indicated of rendering wealth, and whatever talents may accompany it, conducive to our eternal welfare. As the unjust steward made provision, by acts of *false* liberality and beneficence, for his favourable reception among men iniquitous and worthless as himself; so is it in *our* power, by acts of *true* charity and piety, grounded on the sincere love of God and man, to ensure our reception into “everlasting habitations.” What *he* did from the most unworthy and reprehensible motives, *we* are enjoined to do upon the pure principles of faith and virtue;—to

be active, after the pattern of our great Exemplar, and for His sake, in doing good ; to make friends of our worldly goods in a *spiritual* sense, and thus to “lay up in store for “ourselves a good foundation against the “time to come, that we may lay hold on “eternal life.”

The whole practical improvement of the subject may be summed up in few words, and is level to all capacities. The God whom we serve does not exact from us any harsh or impracticable service. He requires not, that we should renounce either the proper use or the rational enjoyments of the present life ; but that we should hold them as in trust from Him, diffuse their benefits to the full extent of the means and opportunities afforded us, and learn experimentally how much “more blessed it is to give than to receive¹.” Thus shall we “so use this world “as not abusing it ;” and prove ourselves infinitely wiser in *our* generation, than the children of this world are in *theirs*. *They* seek only a treasure that abideth not ; *we*, “an “inheritance incorruptible and that fadeth “not away^m.” *They* make provision for the body only, and its perishable concerns ; *we* “seek first the kingdom of God and His

¹ Acts xx. 35.

^m 1 Peter i. 4.

“righteousness,” in full confidence that “all these things shall be added unto usⁿ,” as far as the all-wise Disposer sees best and most fitting. *Their* maxim is that of the Epicurean atheist, “Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die^o:”—*ours*, that of the Christian Apostle, “Godliness hath the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come^p.” Thus, in every point of view, “wisdom is justified of her children^q,” and that divine maxim of the Psalmist is fully verified, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all they that do thereafter; the praise of it endureth for ever^r.”

ⁿ Matth. vi. 33.

^o 1 Cor. xv. 32.

^p 1 Tim. iv. 8.

^q Matth. xi. 19.

^r Psalm cxi. 10.

SERMON X.

ACTS xxvi. 28.

Then Agrippa said, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

THIS confession was drawn from king Agrippa, by the account which St. Paul gave of his miraculous conversion to the Christian faith. The Roman governor, Festus, a heathen, and uninstructed in those evidences which the Apostle stated in confirmation of his belief, regarded his recital as the mere ravings of an enthusiast:—“*Paul, thou art beside thyself: much learning doth make thee mad.*” The Apostle repels the accusation with dignity and firmness, and appeals from so incompetent a judge as Festus to the better information of the king himself: “—I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of those things are

“ hidden from him : for this thing was not
“ done in a corner.”

Agrippa, as appears from Josephus's history, had been brought up in very strict observance of the Jewish religion. His father, who preceded him in the government of Judæa, was remarkably zealous in his attention to its Law and Ritual ; and had obtained for it certain privileges from the Roman emperor, which the persecuting spirit of heathenism was but ill-disposed to concede. His family are represented as partaking in the same attachment to the declining cause of Judaism : and St. Paul, in the beginning of this address, expresses his satisfaction at being brought before Agrippa, whom he knew “ to be expert in all customs and questions which were among the Jews.” He moreover challenges the king's attention to the testimony borne to the Divine mission of Jesus from the Scriptures of the Old Testament :—“ King Agrippa believest thou the
“ *Prophets?* I know that thou believest.” This appeal Agrippa appears to have very sensibly felt. Suddenly he exclaims, “ *Al-*
“ *most thou persuadest me to be a Christian !*” —And transitory as the impression appears to have been, the record of it is an abiding attestation to the resistless energy of truth.

It was the momentary triumph of faith over stubborn infidelity ; of a Jew converted from his errors, over a Jew still pertinaciously adhering to those errors ; of one who had “ taken up the cross ” and followed Christ, over one who, although he could not gainsay the evidence of his own scriptures to that same Christ, “ despised the cross,” and “ sought the praise of men, rather than the “ praise of God ^a.”

The discourse by which St. Paul wrought this extraordinary effect upon his royal hearer, contains many topics specially adapted to awaken the attention of one who was conversant with the Jewish Scriptures. It adverts to “ the promise made to the Fathers,” (the Patriarchs and the Prophets,) of a future Redeemer. This promise the Apostle represents to have been, to every Jewish believer, long a subject of anxious expectation ; and he affirms that in what he had himself preached concerning Jesus, he had said “ none “ other things than those which the Prophets “ and Moses did say should come.”

But since it was obvious that if these evidences were so powerful and convincing, St. Paul himself lay open to the charge of in-

^a John xii. 43.

excusable perverseness in the vehement opposition he had at first made to the Christian faith; the greater part of this address to Agrippa relates to the extraordinary circumstances which wrought his own *conversion*. He conceals not, neither does he attempt to palliate, his former conduct; when, under a persuasion that he “ought to do” many things contrary to the name of Jesus “of Nazareth,” he was foremost in every measure of persecution and bloodshed, against those who professed their belief in Christ. But this very persuasion, this strong prepossession which he had entertained against the cause he now defended, was in itself a strong presumptive argument of the sincerity of his present conviction; and it was a virtual proof, that nothing less than a *miraculous* interposition could have brought it to pass. Yet, however sudden or miraculous the conversion might be, the Apostle shews that his *continuance* in the faith was not the result of superstitious terror, or of blind and implicit credulity, but was daily confirmed and strengthened by a deeper consideration of the Jewish Scriptures; in which he had from his youth been more than ordinarily instructed, though till lately he had viewed them only through the veil of Jewish

prejudice. Upon these proofs of the truth and sincerity of what he advanced, he grounds his expostulation with the king himself, as one who could not fail to be deeply impressed by such cogent evidence.

Dismissing, however, any further consideration of the effect of this discourse upon Agrippa, we may more profitably examine the peculiar nature and force of that testimony which is borne to the truth of Christianity by the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul.

The *character* of this distinguished Apostle, both before and after his conversion, becomes here the first object of inquiry.

Of himself he states, (and he appeals to the whole Jewish nation for the notoriety of the fact,) that he was “*brought up at the feet of “ Gamaliel,”* a learned Jewish doctor, and had lived according to the strictest of the Jewish sects, a *pharisee*; that he was “zealous towards God,” in the same way that the most rigid Jews manifested their zeal, being intolerant of any thing which might appear to derogate from the sanctity of the Mosaic Law; that, with great impetuosity, he acted upon this principle; not content with testifying his own disbelief of the Gospel, but “imprisoning and beating in every synagogue “ them that believed on Christ;” “standing

“ by, when the blood of the martyr Stephen
“ was shed, and consenting unto his death ;”
“ compelling” some also “ to blaspheme ;”
and “ being exceedingly mad” against all who
professed the Christian faith. These are his
own expressions; and St. Luke, his companion
and fellow-labourer in the Gospel, confirms
the account, by saying that he “ made havoc
“ of the church, entering into every house,
“ and haling men and women, committed
“ them to prison ;” and that “ breathing out
“ threatenings and slaughter against the dis-
“ ciples of the Lord,” he “ went unto the
“ high-priest, and desired of him letters to
“ Damascus to the synagogues, that if he
“ found any of this way, whether men or
“ women, he might bring them bound unto
“ Jerusalem ^b.” So truly did he elsewhere
describe his own conduct towards the Chris-
tian church to have been that of a “ blas-
“ phemer, and a persecutor, and injurious ^c.”

It appears, however, that St. Paul had
never seen Jesus until that extraordinary
manifestation of his presence which wrought
his conversion. Consequently he had not
personally witnessed our Lord’s miracles, nor
heard his doctrines. These advantages he

^b Acts ix. 1, 2.

^c 1 Tim. i. 13.

had not enjoyed; and as far as the want of them, and his excessive zeal for early prepossessions deeply rooted in his mind, could palliate his misconduct, more might be said in his excuse, than for the multitude of hardened unbelievers who resisted the very evidence of their senses, in their opposition to the truth.

The zeal, moreover, which this Apostle testified for the *Gospel* after his conversion, was no less fervent than that which before had actuated him in the cause of *Judaism*. The homage which he paid to it was neither reluctant nor transitory. It was a firm, enduring conviction; moderated only by that benevolent spirit which the Gospel itself inculcated. He became as patient now in *suffering* persecution, as he had before been vehement in *inflicting* it. In this he outstripped even the rest of the Apostles. He was “in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft: in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by his own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings

“ often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, “ in cold and nakedness^d.” His spirit, under all these trials, was invincible. But it was a *new* spirit, a new kind of resolution, which engaged him in this warfare. It was the spirit of genuine *charity*, which now urged him to suffer, as well as to contend, in bringing others to the knowledge of the truth. He who had lately “breathed out threatenings and slaughter,” now taught and practised the love that “beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things^e.” With his zeal, his learning also took a new direction. His profound knowledge of the Jewish Law enabled him to display, with so much greater effect, the harmony betwixt the Old and the New Testament; and to this purpose he applied it with eminent success. Though he determined to “know nothing but Jesus Christ, “and him crucified^f;”—making that the basis of all his instructions and exhortations;—yet the whole force of his reasoning powers and his richest stores of scriptural information were continually brought forth, to establish and confirm that fundamental article of the Christian faith.

^d 2 Cor. xi. 23—27.^e 1 Cor. xiii. 7.^f 1 Cor. ii. 2.

From this view of the Apostle's character and conduct, it will readily appear that he was neither deceived himself, nor deceived others; but that, to use his own expressions, he spake "the words of truth and soberness:"—of truth; therefore, not of an *impostor*:—of soberness; therefore, not of an *enthusiast*.

1. What traces, indeed, do we discover of *imposture*, in any part of his history or deportment? The same proofs to the contrary appear in his case, as in the rest of the Apostles; with some peculiar circumstances of additional weight. His conduct in this sudden change was evidently contrary to all worldly views of ambition or of gain. Instead of the triumphant persecutor, he yielded to become the victim of persecution. Instead of seeking to establish a reputation among his countrymen, or among the heathen to whom he preached, for learning and religion; he became the object of their scorn, as one no better than "the filth of the earth, "and the offscouring of all things[§]." Instead of obtaining the applause of the sanhedrim and the court, he was derided as a madman, or stoned as a blasphemer. His earthly career was henceforth to proceed through toil

§ 1 Cor. iv. 14.

and trouble, contempt and obloquy, pains and perils, to the bloody crown of martyrdom. Surely, some strange, some unheard-of spring of action must be discovered in the human mind, before we can pass sentence of imposture on conduct like this!

But, could even this be supposed, where were the means, where the agents, for carrying the imposture into effect?

Here is a plain and simple narrative, thrice repeated by the Evangelist, (twice as it was recited by Paul himself,) of a noon-day occurrence, in the presence of a multitude of witnesses, not one of whom gainsays a tittle of the evidence, or throws a shadow of suspicion on any one of its circumstances. Saul is a notorious persecutor of the faith. He is furnished with authority from its adversaries to root out and to destroy it. He is accompanied by a chosen band, to carry this into effect. They witness the supernatural phenomenon, and are smitten to the earth with terror: but Saul alone is selected as the object of this Divine visitation. Were his *companions*, then, the persons to invent, or to abet the deceit? Did *they* join with him in preaching Jesus, or in suffering for his name's sake? Not a trace of any such conversion appears.—Had the *Apostles* then, or some

other of the disciples, any concern in the transaction? Had they formed the strange design of bringing over this implacable adversary to their cause? What bribes had they to offer? what allurements to hold out? what arguments or persuasives to disarm the fury of this oppressor?—Not only is the sacred history silent as to any such coalition, but refutes it in every respect. The disciples, says St. Luke, “were all scattered “abroad throughout the regions of Judæa “and Samaria, except the Apostles^h ;” and these remained at Jerusalem, while Saul was spreading terror among the faithful on his way to Damascus. The disciples, it appears, were every where terrified at the very name of Saul. Ananias, when directed in a vision to present himself to the new convert, partook of this general dread, and not without reluctance obeyed the heavenly warning. Even after many days, when Paul had made proof of his ministry at Damascus and returned to Jerusalem, desiring to join himself to the disciples, “they were all afraid of him, “and believed not that he was a discipleⁱ,” till Barnabas testified to the certainty of his conversion.

Consider again, under any possible supposi-

^h Acts viii. 1.

ⁱ Acts ix. 26.

tion of deceit in this transaction, what the Apostle became pledged to *do*, as well as to *suffer*, in consequence of his conversion. He was to convict himself of the most flagrant errors, and to turn others from that very blindness and infatuation under which he had so long laboured. Without derogating from the Divine character of the *Jewish* dispensation, he was to shew the error of still adhering to it in opposition to the *Christian* faith. He was to reconcile interests seemingly the most discordant, and to unite both Jew and Gentile in a persuasion the most repugnant to their respective tenets.

Observe, then, how he shaped his conduct in conformity with this obligation; how he combated prejudices similar to those he had himself recently entertained; how unreservedly he declared “the whole counsel of “God^k ;” and, while he proved by irrefragable arguments the cessation of the Jewish Law, and its insufficiency without the Gospel; yet unfolded its real design, confirmed its authority, and bore the most ample and unequivocal testimony to it, as connected both with the earlier and later revelations, each of which had issued from the same infinite wisdom.

^k Acts xx. 27.

St. Paul's character, indeed, under whatever aspect it may be viewed, is not to be confounded with those of an ordinary stamp. From the first period of his conversion, it was shewn him, "how great things he must "suffer"^l for the name of Christ. The readiness with which he nevertheless embraced the Gospel is a virtual proof that, even in his former persecution of it, he had not been actuated by sinister motives. When he calls himself a persecutor and blasphemer, and "the chief of sinners"^m," he does not lay to his own charge the malice, the envy, the secular spirit, which stimulated the chief priests and rulers to their rancorous hatred of Christ. He says, he "obtained mercy, because he did it *ignorantly*, and in unbelief"ⁿ." His understanding, rather than his affections, was engaged on the side of error, and prevented him from discerning the truth. The blindness inflicted upon him at the moment of his conversion, and the subsequent restoration of his sight, were a lively image of the past and present state of his mind. He had discerned nothing of what he ought to have believed, until, by the mercy of God, the scales were removed from his eyes;—his prejudices were done away;—"and he received

^l Acts ix. 16.

^m 1 Tim. i. 15.

ⁿ 1 Tim. i. 13.

“sight forthwith.” The removal of his mental, no less than of his natural blindness, was indeed the work of Divine power: and the restored faculty, in the one case as in the other, he failed not to use to God’s glory, in the high commission conferred upon him. *Then* he appears to have bent the whole force of his mind to the subject. Nor could any one of the Apostles be better qualified;—none, perhaps, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, could be equally well qualified;—to overcome all possible objections and difficulties which might impede the reception of the truth. “Are they *Israelites?*”—said he of the Jews—“*So am I.*” Are they of the *seed of Abraham?* “*So am I.*”—Every sentiment the Jew could cherish in hostility to the Gospel, this Apostle had experimentally known and felt. Hence, both to Jew and Gentile his testimony came with extraordinary force. They saw a man who had not, like the rest of the Apostles, consorted with our Lord, and been from the beginning to the end of his ministry faithfully and constantly attached to him;—not one who had been overpowered by the sight of his wonderful works, or the irresistible persuasion of his heavenly discourses;—not

one who had even “mused,” in doubt and conjecture, whether that might be the Christ or not;—but one who had been signalized among the most headstrong of his opponents; “unknown by face” (as he himself observes,) “unto the churches of Judæa which were in Christ; who had heard only, that he which “persecuted them in times past, now preached “the faith which once he had destroyed^p.”

2. But, although it be thus impossible to conceive St. Paul to have acted the part of the hypocrite and impostor; is it not possible that he might act under the influence of *enthusiasm* or *delusion*?—Might not this lead to his conversion?—Might it not subsequently influence his writings and his conduct?

In cases of enthusiasm, the mind is usually preoccupied by some strong persuasions, inclining it to yield to any suggestions of the imagination, or any extraneous delusion, in confirmation of its own previous impressions. If St. Paul were indeed an enthusiast, this process appears to have been *inverted*. His prepossessions were manifestly *contrary* to the cause he now espoused. His *imagination*, if it were at all busied in the scene, would rather suggest to him visions falling in with the current of his thoughts, than so directly

^p Gal. i. 22, 23.

adverse to them: and if any illusion had been practised upon him, some repugnancy at least might be looked for, from one in whom timidity or imbecility of character can be traced in no other instance.

Does the narrative itself, however, favour any such suspicion?—Here is no tale of secret or lonely visions at the dead of night, when solitude or gloomy contemplations might work upon the perturbations of a wounded conscience, and render it credulous of unreal appearances. The whole occurrence is at mid-day: it takes place before a company bent upon the same errand with Paul himself: it is attended with tokens addressed to the evidence of the senses; “a light above the brightness of the sun,” visible to all the party; a voice heard to issue from that light; instant blindness inflicted upon their leader, and continuing for the space of three days, till removed without human power or skill. When did imagination or artifice work such wonders as these? or what less than absolute insanity can be ascribed to a whole company like this, believing such phenomena, if none such actually took place?

But the *character* of St. Paul is alone sufficient to rebut a charge so improbable and

groundless. Festus might ignorantly, or inconsiderately, say, “ Paul, thou art beside thyself, much learning doth make thee mad^q :” but none who are conversant with his writings, none who have duly considered his actions, will adopt that calumny. Let the sceptic who cherishes such a surmise, study—if he be competent to study—the Epistles to the *Romans*, to the *Galatians*, and to the *Hebrews* : and let him say where he will find equal strength of conception, equal vigour of understanding, equal depth and solidity of reasoning. Let him try the force of the Apostle’s penetration and discernment in discussing with the philosophers of *Corinth* the doctrine of a resurrection of the dead. Let him accompany this mighty convert through his eventful history recorded by his faithful companion St. Luke : let him read his sermon before the synagogue at *Antioch* ; his remonstrance with the idolaters in *Lystra* ; his discourse to the philosophers of *Athens* ; his last farewell to the church of *Ephesus* ; his address to the incensed multitude at *Jerusalem* ; his defence before *Felix* ; and, lastly, his pleadings before *Agrippa*, the subject of our present consideration. In these, let him discover, if he can, any traces

^q Acts xxvi. 24.

of the fanatical zealot, any thing not consistent with sound discretion, with the most deliberate and discriminating judgment, with entire self-possession, and soberness of mind, free from every tincture of fickleness or extravagance.

But we have still higher proofs than these to shew that this Apostle could neither be an enthusiast nor a deceiver. We have the testimony of *miracles*, the testimony of *prophecy*, and the testimony of *Divine inspiration*. He had “the gift of tongues^r,” above the rest of the Apostles, enabling him to verify the promise made to him at his conversion, that he should be “a chosen vessel to bear the name “of Christ before the gentiles, and kings, and “the children of Israel^s.” Several of his miracles wrought upon others are upon record in the Acts of the Apostles. He foretold some special circumstances of his own history, and others relating to the future destinies of the church. His inspiration is attested by St. Peter, as well as by St. Luke; and is further proved by the nature of the *doctrine* which he preached, which was such as could not be the result of human learning, and perfectly harmonizes with the rest of holy writ. So long as these evidences re-

^r 1 Cor. xiv. 18.

^s Acts ix. 15.

main unshaken, the history of this Apostle's conversion, and of the consequences resulting from it, admit not of a question. They entirely accord with every other part of his history, and with the whole tenor of his writings, which testify throughout, the immediate suggestion and superintendence of the Almighty.

The conversion of St. Paul, then, was in every point of view an event of the highest importance to the Christian church. It *almost* persuaded Agrippa to be a Christian; and, no doubt, it would have led him to become *altogether* so, had he not stifled the impressions it had made, and forced his convictions to yield to corrupt self-interest and secular ambition. Upon the Jews, among whom his reputation stood so high for knowledge and for zeal in their own Law, it could not but powerfully operate to overcome their stubborn prejudices. To *other* nations it would appear a convincing argument of the reality of the miracle, that such a man should not only on a sudden embrace Christianity, but become more especially the Apostle of the *Gentile* world, labouring to bring *them* to the acknowledgment of the faith, and to make them, together with the Jews, “one fold, under one Shepherd.”

This event teaches also many an important lesson to believers, and to unbelievers, of the present day.

Infidels may learn how vain it is to resist the evidence which subdued the high and haughty spirit of this once persecutor, and afterwards Apostle, of the church. Let them not plead that this was a *miracle*, or think themselves excusable because no such preternatural means have been afforded for their own conviction. We know that even the evidence of miracles may be, and has been, resisted. The Pharisees said of Christ, “What do we? for this man doeth many miracles^t;” —and again, of the Apostles, “that indeed a notable miracle hath been done, is manifest, and we cannot deny it^v.” But no such perverseness can be charged upon St. Paul. We have no record that he ever deliberately resisted such evidences as unbelievers now resist, in rejecting Christ. His prepossessions were in favour of a religion really of Divine origin; not in favour of human opinions, in opposition to Revelation. On the part of a sincere Jew, it would indeed have been apostasy to relinquish a religion so attested as that of Moses, without incon-

^t John xi. 47.

^v Acts iv. 16.

testable evidence that the same Divine power by which it had been given now willed its cessation. St. Paul's prejudices, therefore, were not those of a careless or a libertine spirit, but of profound veneration for that which was really sacred. Nevertheless, he yielded instantly on conviction, and was the first to acknowledge his error in disbelieving. His example stands directly opposed to such views of the subject as those on which modern infidelity relies.

Christians, on the other hand, cannot but find their faith corroborated by this splendid instance of Divine power and mercy towards one through whose subsequent labours so large a portion of the Gentile world, and, perhaps, our own country in particular, have had the light of the Gospel imparted to them. They may hence learn not to despond even in times most discouraging to the church of God, nor to despair of the conversion even of its bitterest opponents. An ever-watchful Providence can raise up instruments for its protection, when they are least expected; and the efficacy of Divine grace can at all times "turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just." The age of miracles is indeed gone by. No preternatural

light or voice from heaven awakens the infidel from his stupor, or pours conviction upon the sinner. Conversions either from impenitency or from unbelief are now usually the result of imperceptible operations of Divine grace, through the instrumentality of those ordinary means of instruction and reformation which the word and the ministry of God supply. No warrant, therefore, is given by this narrative to the pretences which fanatics in these days are wont to make, of sudden calls to a state of grace, by perceptible impulses of the Holy Spirit. These are to be received with caution, and even with distrust. Nevertheless, such records as that which we have here considered afford a pledge and assurance, that the Divine blessing will never be wanting where human means are faithfully and diligently applied.

Let us bless God, then, who hath thus caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world; and shew our thankfulness for it, by holding fast the profession of our faith. Let us also beseech God to “have mercy upon all Jews, Turks, Infidels, “and Heretics, and to take from them all “ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt

“ of His word.” And let it be our daily prayer, that “ His kingdom may come,” and that “ all the ends of the earth may see the “ salvation of our God^w.”

^w Isaiah lii. 10.

SERMON XI.

ACTS xvii. 22, 23.

Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.

AMONG the memorable occurrences recorded in the earliest annals of Christianity, none appear to give greater weight and dignity to its pretensions, than those which manifest the consciousness of superiority, in its inspired teachers over the boasted attainments of the heathen sages. The first labours of the Apostles in the Gentile world were directed, not to the conversion of ignorant barbarians, incompetent to judge of their doctrine, or prone to receive with avidity whatever might be marvellous or imposing in its appearance, but to nations the

most civilized, and even to their most enlightened assemblies. They opposed, not only the gross prejudices of the vulgar, but the learned sophistry of the schools: and in their discourses addressed to these, there is a tone of decisive authority, which though it partakes not of the arrogance of human wisdom, evidently flows from a consciousness that “they spake as the Spirit gave them utterance^a,” empowered by his unerring influence to enlighten and instruct mankind. Yet we cannot but observe, at the same time, with what admirable *discretion* these faithful messengers of their Lord fulfilled the high purpose of their mission; how they adapted their exhortations and reproofs to the peculiar characters or circumstances of the persons they sought to convert; sometimes winning them to the truth by a considerate regard to their deep-rooted prepossessions, sometimes reasoning with them upon their own principles, rather than extorting from them a forced assent to the truths that were set before them.

The portion of Scripture from which the words of the text are taken, affords an instance illustrative of St. Paul’s conduct in these respects.

^a Acts ii. 4.

It appears, that being detained for a short time at Athens, he paid particular attention to the state of religion in that renowned seat of learning and refinement: and “his
“ spirit was stirred within him, when he saw
“ the city wholly given to idolatry. There-
“ fore disputed he in the synagogue with the
“ Jews, and with the devout persons, and in
“ the market daily with them that met with
“ him. Then certain philosophers of the
“ Epicureans, and of the Stoics, encountered
“ him. Then some said, What will this bab-
“ bler say? other some, He seemeth to be a
“ setter forth of strange gods: because he
“ preached unto them Jesus, and the resur-
“ rection. And they took him and brought
“ him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know
“ what this new doctrine, whereof thou speak-
“ est, is? for thou bringest certain strange
“ things to our ears: we would know there-
“ fore what these things mean.”—The A-
postle, thus publicly confronted with these
philosophers, in the presence of a mixed mul-
titude of Jews and Greeks, and probably be-
fore the magistracy of the place, seizes the
opportunity to endeavour to reclaim them
from the service of the false deities whom
they adored, and to bring them to a purer
and more rational worship. Standing in the

midst of the Areopagus, and surrounded by an auditory more disposed to ridicule than to revere him, he challenges their attention in these remarkable words;—"Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you."

Such an exordium, addressed to the inhabitants of a city famed for philosophy, literature, and eloquence, and, as the Evangelist intimates, ever in quest of novelties, could hardly fail to excite attention. It has been observed, however, that one expression used by the Apostle is somewhat unfavourably rendered in our version, the original word translated, "*too superstitious*," being capable of a milder sense, and probably used by St. Paul as a term of conciliation, rather than of reproach; implying that they were more *religiously disposed* than other people, and might be expected so much more willingly to hear what he had to advance. Taken in this acceptation, it would afford an instance of that forbearance and courtesy on the part of the Apostle, which not unfrequently marked his conduct. More generally, how-

ever, the expression is interpreted in the sense given in our translation; which perhaps better accords with what is said just before, that “his spirit was stirred within him, “when he saw the city wholly given to idol-
“atry,” and that he had already publicly “disputed” with them; in consequence of which disputes he was now called upon to make a more explicit declaration of his doctrine.

The reproof, however, (if such it was,) is evidently directed more to their want of knowledge, than to their wilful corruption of the truth:—“Whom ye *ignorantly* worship, “Him declare I unto you:”—as if he had said, I am not a preacher of *new* deities, or of *new* doctrines: your *unknown* God, to whom you have dedicated this altar, is the God whose worship I profess, and of whom, if ye will receive my instructions, I am prepared to give you more worthy conceptions;—thus supposing them to be desirous of knowing the truth, and to have a sincere disposition to religious fear and worship, which only required to be directed to its proper object.

Various conjectures have been formed respecting this unknown deity of the Athenians; a point of considerable importance,

both from the use the Apostle makes of it, and from the insight it may afford into the religious opinions of the heathen world.

That it was not an unfrequent practice among the Greeks and Romans to raise altars to unknown gods, admits of no dispute ; and it is accounted for on the general principles of polytheism, which made its followers solicitous not to omit due honours to any possibly existing divinity, even though unacquainted with his name, his title, or the objects of his special charge. This grew out of their notion of local and tutelary deities, which led to a supposition that strange countries must necessarily have “strange gods ;” and hence, in the excess of their reverence or their fears respecting these unknown beings, they deemed it expedient to propitiate foreign as well as domestic divinities, by altars and services consecrated, collectively, to the *unknown gods*. For the same reason also, whenever, by conquest or alliance, they established an intercourse with any other country, it was one of their first objects to admit the gods of that country, and the worship belonging to them, to an intercommunity with their own ; a pliancy of principle, which some admirers of paganism delight to contemplate as an attractive feature in the reli-

gion of the Gentile world. From these circumstances it has been conjectured, that the altar which St. Paul found at Athens might be one of this *general* description ; and it has been contended that there is a want of evidence to prove that either at Athens or elsewhere altars were ever raised to ONE unknown God.

It seems, however, to cast a somewhat unworthy reflection upon the Apostle, to suppose that in a public assembly of intelligent and discerning men, he would hazard a reproof or admonition grounded on what he averred to have seen, if no such thing were actually to be found, or even if it were a doubtful matter. And it is equally difficult to conceive, that St. Luke, the companion of St. Paul, should either have been misinformed in this particular, or have misapprehended St. Paul's assertion ; when almost every Greek could instantly have disproved it, and have appealed to multitudes of witnesses in detection of the error. Against such testimony, the mere want of extraneous evidence appears to be wholly inadmissible. Yet even evidence of this kind has been thought fairly deducible from certain passages of classical writers, which seem to have reference to this particular altar at Athens. Upon such

proofs, however, it is unnecessary to insist. The whole of the Apostle's reasoning rests upon the supposition that the Athenians *ignorantly* paid honours to the TRUE GOD. It is not to be supposed that St. Paul would have profaned the majesty of the Most High, by identifying it with that of any *false* god, whether with or without a name. His purpose, in *that* case, would surely have been, to convince them that even the *object* of their devotions was either an absolute non-entity, or wholly unworthy of their reverence. Whereas the train of his argument appears to be simply this:—The God whom they ignorantly worshipped, and to whom this altar was inscribed, was the same whom *he* declared unto them; but the God whom *he* declared was the *true God*; therefore, the God whom *they* ignorantly worshipped was the *true God*. Turning this incidental circumstance to advantage, the Apostle takes occasion hence to preach to them that true and only God, whose essence, whose attributes, and whose works they had no means of rightly apprehending, although they seemed to manifest a disposition to render Him due homage, could they be made acquainted with his real nature and perfections. “HIM,” says the Apostle, “*I declare unto you.*” I will give you clearer and

more adequate conceptions of him. I will declare his works and his counsels. I will shew how unworthily he is worshipped by such services as yours, and how grossly he is debased by your imaginary deities being permitted to rob him of “the honour due unto “his name^b.”

Nothing can exceed the force, the consistency, the dignity, with which the Apostle presses this consideration upon his hearers. As the minister and ambassador of that very God, whom the Athenians knew not, though they blindly adored him, he urges them to turn from their superstitious vanities, their dumb idols, their profane altars, to adore this sole Creator and Governor of the universe. As if presuming, from their acknowledgment of an *unknown* God, that they already entertained a strong, though indistinct persuasion of such a Being, essentially different from those which swelled the multifarious catalogue of their Pantheon; he seizes upon this circumstance as the vital part of the argument. “God,” says he, “that made the “world and all things therein, seeing that he “is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not “in temples made with hands;”—he is not a mere *local* Deity, like many of those whom ye

^c Psalm xxix. 2.

worship ;—“ neither is he worshipped with
“ men’s hands, as though he needed any thing;
“ seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and
“ all things ;”—He is not, as you seem to
imagine, to be sought by vain oblations, by
external pomp, or idle pageantry, as if he
were such an one as yourselves, or depended
upon your services.—Moreover, “ He hath
“ made of one blood all nations of men, for
“ to dwell on all the face of the earth ;” and
is not, therefore, the God of this or that
country or nation in particular, but equally
of all mankind. To him every nation, every
individual, owes both existence and preserva-
tion ; and to this end are all created, that
they should “ seek the Lord, if haply they
“ might feel after him, and find him, though
“ he be not far from every one of us ; for in
“ him we live, and move, and have our being.”
Nor is this a doctrine, continues the Apostle,
with which you yourselves are wholly unac-
quainted, since “ certain also of your own
“ poets have said, *For we are also his offspring.*”
This last citation intimates that St. Paul re-
garded the more intelligent and enlightened
among the heathen as recognising one Su-
preme Being, the Creator and Preserver of
all mankind ; and on this he grounds his
ensuing admonition to forsake their idola-

trous superstitions: “ Forasmuch, then, as “ we are the offspring of God, we ought not “ to think that the Godhead is like unto “ gold, or silver, or stone graven by art and “ man’s device.” The inference, indeed, was obvious, and the consequence not to be gainsayed, that if the One Supreme Being whom they *ignorantly* worshipped was such an one as St. Paul *declared* Him to be, nothing could be more absurd or preposterous than the whole ritual of heathen worship, paid to senseless idols or to imaginary deities.

But while we contemplate and admire the excellent use to which the Apostle thus applied an incidental occurrence, during his abode among the Athenian philosophers, a question presents itself, how far the heathen in general, or the Athenians in particular, may be said to have had any notion of the TRUE GOD; and, if they had, from what source it was derived: for assuredly St. Paul could not mean to ascribe to the Jupiter of the heathen the attributes and perfections of JEHOVAH, when he thus led the Athenians to suppose that his God and theirs was one and the same Being. Some evidence, therefore, may reasonably be expected, that they were not altogether destitute of this perception, however clouded or obscured.

We are wont, indeed, to consider any system of polytheism as utterly irreconcilable with the belief of “One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and “in all^c.” And so unquestionably it is, where the doctrine of the Divine Unity is rightly and clearly understood. But, in point of fact, it appears that many even of the wisest among the heathen fell into this inconsistency; and while they professed to acknowledge a multiplicity of gods, greater or less in power and in consequence, and derived from some parent stock, asserted at the same time *One* only Being uncreated and self-existent. The theogonies of their poets, the speculations of their philosophers, and the religious institutions of the state, accorded with the belief of the common people in a numberless host of divinities, produced at different periods of time, circumscribed by local restrictions, or subordinate one to the other. But neither among statesmen, philosophers, or poets, nor, perhaps, even among the great mass of the people, did the reverence paid to these entirely preclude the apprehension of a still superior Being, invested in their ideas with so much more transcendent majesty

^c Ephes. iv. 6.

from their indefinite notion of him, and their utter inability to lower him to the level of their own conceptions.

Evidence to this effect has been collected from heathen philosophers and poets. Among the former, much refined speculation is to be found respecting the abstract nature of the First Cause of all things; and upon this point the earliest philosophy appears to have been the simplest and the purest. In process of time, these simple truths became more and more the subjects of recondite speculation. From contemplation of the visible world, and from the necessary connexion between cause and effect, it was inferred that there was one First Cause of all things; and His supreme excellence and perfection were argued from the necessity of removing from the very idea of such a Being every kind of imperfection. Hence it appears that, in the opinion of these writers, the pagan polytheism did not necessarily imply that the inferior deities were self-existent, or independent; but that they were created beings, either naturally above men, or deified men, to be honoured with religious worship, in subordination to the universal Lord and Parent. This theory of many gods proceeding from one Supreme Divinity, is, perhaps, the main

key to the whole system of pagan theology, as exhibited in the subtleties of the philosophic schools, and coincides with the general persuasion of an *unknown God*; a God, of whom they seem almost ready to have said, with the Psalmist, “The Lord is great, “and greatly to be praised. He is to be “feared above all gods;”—“worship HIM, all “ye gods^d.”

Nothing, perhaps, is more remarkable than the coincidence in this respect between the refined opinions of the learned and the ruder sentiments of the common people. With all the subtlety and affected superiority of the former, there were intermixed, not merely popular professions of adherence to the established modes of religion, (which it would have been perilous openly to disavow,) but an evidently earnest desire to reconcile the public creed with their own purer views of theological truth. Socrates himself did not disclaim the inferior divinities; but died, directing an act of worship to be paid to one of them;—and the character of Socrates is above all suspicion of insincerity. Doubtless, he believed in the existence of such gods; deeming that belief to be not irreconcilable with

^d Psalm xcvi. 4. and xcvii. 7.

an acknowledgment of One Supreme Being. Plato exercised his powerful mind in endeavouring to amalgamate these discordant principles, and to establish his favourite theory that the Divine Essence consists of one self-existent Intelligence, with many of a subordinate description emanating from it. The speculations of Aristotle, and many other philosophers of eminence, will be found, more or less, to embrace a similar hypothesis. On the other hand, the illiterate and uninstructed multitude, while they appear to have been sunk in the lowest depths of ignorance, and addicted to the most gross superstitions, were yet not altogether destitute of these same impressions. Indications, at least, of this have been noticed by diligent inquirers, from the writings of some popular heathen poets, and from dramatic writers in particular, whose sentiments and expressions may be supposed most in unison with the prevalent notions of their times. This concurring testimony tends to shew, that among persons of every class, learned or unlearned, weak or wise, there prevailed something like an instinctive or hereditary apprehension of a Being, “above all gods;” of whom they stood in awe, and whose favour they were desirous to propitiate, though they knew Him

not, “neither had they knowledge of His “laws^e.”

But now comes the question, How were these notions of the true God first imparted, either to the one or the other of these different classes of men? Whence arose these conceptions of him, however imperfect; and how shall we account for such an universality of opinion, under circumstances so apparently hopeless and discouraging?—The question is not without its difficulties, and affords a copious and interesting subject of inquiry.

If we suppose these impressions of a Supreme Being to have been *innate* in the human mind, it seems wonderful that they should not have more effectually secured mankind in general against such gross and unworthy conceptions of him, as almost universally prevailed where the light of revelation was wanting. If we ascribe them to the *gradual discovery of reason* in some few well-cultivated minds, better able to deduce effects from causes, and more fitted for abstract contemplation than those of an ordinary stamp; then it is scarcely less astonishing, that such vast intellectual powers as, in many instances, were exercised in these speculations, should

^e Psalm cxlvii. 20.

still have laboured under so much doubt and perplexity, and have fallen so far short of that knowledge which, by the light of revelation, is now imparted to persons even of the most slender attainments. To some other source, therefore, it seems necessary to trace these generally prevailing sentiments. And where shall we find this, but in that primitive intercourse which, as the Scriptures testify, man was permitted to hold with his Creator; deriving immediately from the fountain of knowledge and perfection, notions, which otherwise the labour of a whole life might have been insufficient to enable him to acquire?

There is, indeed, abundant evidence to corroborate this supposition; and to shew that whatever aid the light of nature may afford to such researches, mankind were not originally left to *reason out* these truths for themselves; nor perhaps were ever placed under such circumstances as to be *entirely* dependent upon their natural powers for the knowledge of them. That man was from the beginning instructed by Divine revelation, seems to be every where supposed in Holy Writ; false religions being uniformly represented as the corrupt inventions of men perversely “forsaking God,” and following their

own imaginations. With this representation profane history well accords ; since it enables us to trace the earliest departures from sacred truth to those countries where it was first made known by means of revelation, and where, even after the lapse of ages, it has never been totally effaced. With this also corresponds the history of philosophy itself ; which is well known to have made its progress from the east to Greece and Rome, carrying with it, amidst all its impurities and imperfections, so much of primitive truth and of first principles of theology, as to form a solid and substantial groundwork, on which the discernment and the perseverance of Gentile sages were enabled to raise many a goodly fabric of moral and religious wisdom, worthy of the veneration of their contemporaries, and not undeserving of the admiration of their more enlightened, though not more sagacious posterity.

It is unnecessary to enter further into a field of investigation so extensive, and which has so often been traversed by the ablest inquirers. It ought, however, constantly to be borne in mind,—that as, on the one hand, it is hardly possible to account for that general indistinct apprehension of the true God which appears to have pervaded the heathen

world, or for that more enlightened persuasion of his existence and perfections entertained by persons of deeper research, without taking into consideration the scattered remains of *traditional* religion derived from their forefathers, and by their forefathers derived from revelation itself;—so neither, on the other hand, can we well account for these defaced and mutilated fragments of Divine truth being oftentimes so successfully wrought into systematic form, and taking such strong hold on the attention and affections of mankind, without admitting that there must be, with respect to these primitive truths and first principles of religion, a foundation that lies deep in the nature of things; that there must be something, in their very essence, so congenial with the best feelings of the human heart and the suggestions of a pure and unsophisticated understanding, that, when presented to the mind, it is almost impossible to refuse them acceptance. Hence they have become so interwoven with our very nature, as to be regarded rather as instinctive, than acquired perceptions. We reason upon them almost as axioms, for which no demonstrative proof is requisite; or if we seek to substantiate them either by external or internal evidence, we find at hand proofs irrefragable

and innumerable, to fortify our conviction of their truth. So entirely, in this respect, does revealed accord with natural truth ; and so perfectly has the Author of both made his works and his word to bear testimony to each other.

Nevertheless, these same considerations tend to prove the expediency, or rather the necessity of still further revelations, to fix on an immoveable basis even that first great article of all religion, the knowledge of God himself. If the united force of tradition and the light of nature proved insufficient to prevent that general defection from the True God which characterized the whole Gentile world ; it is evident that the longer such a state of alienation continued, the more hopeless would be the recovery of truths already so obscured and defaced. Tradition would grow weaker and weaker ; and reason, deprived of this support, would become less and less able to contend against idolatry and infidelity, until the whole earth, perhaps, had sunk into the lowest depths of atheism on the one hand, or the most debasing superstition, on the other. “Darkness” must have “covered the earth, and gross darkness the people,” had not the Prophet’s cheering proclamation been realized, “Arise, shine, for

“thy light is come, and the glory of the
“ Lord is risen upon thee^f.”

Nor let us forget that to this light we ourselves are probably indebted for even that lowest degree of knowledge which would distinguish us from the most ignorant barbarian in savage life, as well as for those attainments which have enabled philosophers in Christian countries to rise superior to the highest efforts of heathen wisdom, in framing systems of religious truth. And if, in contemplating any of those systems, we incline to think that they may securely rest upon the basis of natural and moral evidence, unsupported by Revelation; let us consider well what reason there is to presume, that, without some aid, originally derived from that source, mankind would ever have been able to advance one single step towards a knowledge of their Creator, much less to have reached those heights to which some few rarely-gifted spirits actually did attain, before Christianity appeared. Neither may we presume, that we ourselves could ever have surpassed those heights, or have even attained to them, had we not been blessed with a far brighter light than that by which

^f Isaiah lx. 1, 2.

their path was illumined. Yet, after all, what was their knowledge compared with ours? Did it suffice, either to overcome the most brutish ignorance among the vulgar, or to dispel the anxious disquietudes of more elevated minds? Did it practically prevent even the most elevated from “changing the truth of God into a lie, and worshipping and serving the creature more than the Creator;”—from “changing the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things;” and thus, in the strong language of St. Paul, “professing themselves wise,” to “become fools?”—Whom, therefore, *we* might as “ignorantly have worshipped” as they did, HIM hath the revealed word of God “declared” unto us. We might have had, like them, dark and confused apprehensions of his being and perfections. Early impressions of his existence might have been received from faint traditions; and, by maturer consideration of the natural world, these impressions might haply have been strengthened and enlarged: and, to crown all, we too might have raised altars and have offered up sacrifice to the *unknown God*. For what is there, either in

the nature of things, or in the innate capacity of the human mind, which would have enabled us with better success than the Athenians to prosecute such inquiries?

These observations will produce their proper effect, if they lead us to regard the state of the heathen world as affording decisive evidence how far the religion of nature is capable of conducting us without a superior guide. The supposed perfection of natural religion, in the abstract, need not be disputed. Nor need we deny that its main truths are even capable of moral demonstration. But when and where has it been exhibited in that perfect state? and by whom have its truths been so demonstrated? Has it ever yet been thus exhibited or demonstrated, except among those who have enjoyed the benefit of Revelation, whether or not they have thought fit to acknowledge their obligations to it? The question can only, in fairness, be determined by reference to what the world has experienced where Revelation was absolutely or almost entirely unknown. Look, then, at any people either wholly destitute of that advantage, or no further acquainted with it than through the medium of remote and obscure tradition. Examine their doctrines. Observe their morals. See what no-

tions they entertain of the Supreme Being, of religious worship, or of the true end and happiness of man. If on each of these, manifest and gross errors have prevailed; if even on fundamental truths the best and wisest among them have not been able thoroughly to satisfy themselves, or to convince others; may we not ask, with the Apostle, “Where is the wise? Where is the “scribe? Where is the disputer of this “world? Hath not God made foolish the “wisdom of this world^h?”

Still, however, these researches have their value. The Gospel itself is not addressed to us as weak and credulous beings, incapable of discerning between what is worthy or unworthy of God to promulgate, or of man to receive. To its doctrines, no less than to its precepts, the injunction applies, “in malice “be ye children, but in understanding be “menⁱ:”—entertain no prejudices hostile to truth, receive it with the simplicity of an ingenuous mind, yet “be ready always to give “a reason of the hope that is in you^k.” St. Paul reasoned with the Athenians from the natural and moral evidences of the Divine perfections. He reasoned also with the Corinthians from similar evidences, in proof of

^h 1 Cor. i. 20.ⁱ 1 Cor. xiv. 20.^k 1 Peter iii. 15.

a resurrection from the dead. Our blessed Saviour frequently suggested to his hearers considerations of the same kind: and notwithstanding our inability to discover spiritual truths, yet, when discovered, various are the corroborating testimonies within our reach by which they may be confirmed, illustrated, and recommended so much the more effectually to general acceptance. By the due application of such means we shall most effectually fulfil the injunctions to “prove all things^l,” and to “believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they be of God^m.”

Thus it appears that the deplorable state of the Gentile world at the first promulgation of the Gospel, the labours of the Apostles, and of St. Paul in particular, in “turning them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God,” and the eminent success of their labours in establishing those great elementary principles of religion which form the basis of the whole mystery of our Redemption,—all combine to impress us with the deepest feelings of gratitude and humility, of admiration and awe. While they admonish us of our own natural imbecility and corruption, they elevate our thoughts to the inscrutable perfections of the Divine nature,

^l 1 Thess. v. 21.

^m 1 John iv. 1.

and to the boundless mercy and love of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, in delivering us from the bondage of ignorance and error, and leading us to the knowledge of the truth. Our bounden duty, in return for these benefits, is, that we “worship God in “spirit and in truthⁿ ;” that we “have fellowship with the Father and with his Son^o ;” that being now “light in the Lord,” we “walk as children of light,” having “no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness^p ;” and that we “present ourselves a “living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, “which is our reasonable service^q .” These are the indispensable obligations we owe to “the Author and Finisher of our faith ;” and “if we know these things, happy are we if we “do them^r :”

ⁿ John iv. 24.

^o 1 John i. 2.

^p Ephes. v. 8, 11.

^q Rom. xii. 1.

^r John xiii. 17.

SERMON XII.

ROMANS ix. 13, 14.

As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid.

IN judging of any portion of Holy Writ, and especially of the historical occurrences in the Old Testament, it is highly necessary that we bear in mind the general scope and design of the sacred writings. The main purpose of these writings is to unfold the history of man's redemption, and to trace its gradual accomplishment from the earliest ages of mankind to that "fulness of time," when "God sent forth his Son" to perform the promises made to the Patriarchs, to Moses, and to the Prophets. In the developement of this great design, many instances are recorded of the overruling providence of the Almighty rendering the most untoward actions and circumstances subservient to His will. Narratives of this kind not only derive great

additional interest from being thus connected with the leading object of the Scriptures, but may hence oftentimes be cleared from difficulties and misconceptions, to which they would otherwise remain liable.

To remove these, however, it is further necessary that we carefully discriminate between the characters of the persons concerned in such occurrences, and the purpose to which the Divine Providence rendered them instrumental. We are not to suppose that every action related of persons the most distinguished in holy writ for piety and goodness is recorded for our imitation, however conducive it may appear to have been to the designs of the Almighty. It is the sole prerogative of the Almighty to “make all things work together for good,” and even to bring good out of evil. It is therefore incumbent upon us to form our judgment of men’s personal conduct in these transactions according to the principles of duty laid down in Scripture itself, and not to imagine that the good or ill success resulting from it is a certain proof of the Divine approbation or disapprobation of the respective parties.

The history of Jacob and Esau, referred to by the Apostle in the text, is one of those portions of Scripture which require particu-

lar attention to these rules. It has often been alleged, on the one hand, to give countenance to the Calvinistic doctrine of God's absolute election or reprobation of particular persons; and, on the other hand, it has no less frequently been scoffed at by unbelievers, as implicating the Supreme Being in the encouragement of deceit and falsehood. For the removal of such injurious reflections it will be necessary to consider the whole transaction with a view more especially to St. Paul's application of it, first, as it relates to the Divine purpose, secondly, as it concerns the parties themselves.

1. That we may fully understand both the history itself and St. Paul's application of it, it is necessary to observe, that before the birth of Esau and Jacob, the Almighty had expressly revealed His will in favour of Jacob, the younger son. "The Lord said unto Rebekah, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people, and the elder shall serve the younger^a." On this passage St. Paul observes, that "the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God ac-

^a Genesis xxv. 23.

“ cording to election might stand, not of
“ works, but of him that calleth, it was said
“ unto her, The elder shall serve the younger.”
He then quotes a passage from the prophet
Malachi ;—“ As it is written, Jacob have I
“ loved, but Esau have I hated^b :” and he
adds, “ What shall we say then ? Is there un-
“ righteousness with God ? God forbid. For
“ he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on
“ whom I will have mercy, and I will have
“ compassion on whom I will have compas-
“ sion. So then it is not of him that willeth,
“ nor of him that runneth, but of God that
“ sheweth mercy.”

Upon this interpretation by St. Paul, I have already observed that attempts have been made to establish the doctrine of absolute or unconditional election and predestination, with reference to the salvation of individual persons ; a doctrine altogether unconnected with the history itself, and with the purpose for which St. Paul refers to it. For the Apostle, throughout this chapter, and throughout the greater part of the Epistle, is occupied solely in producing arguments to prove the calling of the Gentiles to the Christian covenant, and the rejection of the Jews through their unbelief. And since

^b Malachi i. 2, 3.

the Jews rested their pretensions to the exclusive favour of God chiefly upon the special privileges they had enjoyed as his chosen people, he shews that these privileges were only temporary ; and bestowed, not from any claim either of merit or of primogenitureship which they or their ancestors could pretend to, but from the mere good-will of the Almighty in choosing this or that people, or individual, through whom the promised blessing should be conveyed to mankind.

Such is the general tenor of the Apostle's reasoning ; and the reference to Jacob and Esau is in illustration of this view of the subject. The privilege of being progenitors of the promised seed was conferred upon such branches of the patriarchal families as God saw fit. Isaac was preferred to Ishmael ; Jacob to Esau ; and that without assigning the grounds of preference ; just as “ the potter “ hath power over the clay, of the same lump “ to make one vessel to honour, and another “ to dishonour^c.” But this has no reference to the gift of eternal life ; much less to any arbitrary election of particular persons to salvation, without regard to their personal qualifications. Not a word is said respecting the

^c Romans ix. 21.

spiritual condition of either of the parties, or of their posterity. The whole relates to predictions declaring from whose seed the promised Messiah should spring. Now such distinctions and privileges are unquestionably at the absolute disposal of Him “whose “kingdom ruleth over all^d,” who “putteth “down one, and setteth up another^e,” and who, in His providential administration of human affairs, “giveth not account of any of “his matters^f.” To some particular nations or individuals these distinctions must necessarily have been confined. Why the Jewish nation, rather than any other, was selected to be His peculiar people; why the promised seed was to spring from Isaac rather than Ishmael, and from Jacob rather than from Esau; are questions with which we have no concern. The proper answer to them is this: “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest “against God^g?” It is sufficient that such was the Divine will, and that no injury was done to those on whom these peculiar marks of favour were not bestowed; none being entitled to claim them as of especial right, nor any thereby excluded from the general benefits eventually resulting from them.

^d Ps. ciii. 19.^e Ps. lxxv. 7.^f Job xxxiii. 13.^g Rom. ix. 20.

That these distinctions were not in any wise connected with the personal salvation of the respective parties is evident from the very terms in which they were prophetically announced. It was predicted that from the issue of Isaac *two nations* should proceed, and that the one should be stronger than the other, and the elder serve the younger. This was amply verified both with regard to Esau and Jacob themselves, and to their posterity. But when it is said, that the Lord “loved Jacob and hated Esau,” the expressions denote only (according to a mode of speech not unusual in the sacred writings) that a greater degree of favour was shewn to Jacob than to his brother, by limiting to his posterity the promise made to Abraham. Thus when it is said in Hosea, “I will have mercy, and not sacrifice^b,” the meaning is not, that sacrifice was to be omitted, but that mercy was to be preferred before it, where both could not be performed. And so again, when our Lord says, “He who hateth not father, and mother, “and wife, and children, and brethren, and “sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot “be my discipleⁱ,” this cannot possibly be understood in any other sense, than that the faithful Christian must be prepared to make

^b Hosea vi. 6.

ⁱ Luke xiv. 26.

his affections for these yield to the higher duty he owes to his heavenly Lord and Master. Such expressions, therefore, of love or hatred must be taken in a *comparative*, not an *absolute* sense, and are to be interpreted with reference to the particular purpose for which they are used. Now the privilege of which the Jews, as the descendants of Jacob, were wont to make their boast, the Apostle shews did by no means warrant them in arrogating to themselves any exclusive right to the Divine favour; since it originated entirely in the free grace, the sovereign disposal of Almighty God. The promise was first freely made to Abraham. Abraham was desirous that it should be fixed in the line of Ishmael; but God denied his request, and bestowed it on Isaac. And in the case of Esau and Jacob, Isaac's intention of transmitting it to the elder son was frustrated, "that the purpose of God, according to" the "election" he had made of the younger son, "might stand, not of works," not of any meritorious claim on the part of Jacob, "but of "HIM that calleth," that is, of GOD, who had declared beforehand that so it should be. In all this there is nothing that can with propriety be applied to the calling and election of individuals to a state of salvation. On the

contrary, the scope of the Apostle's reasoning is to convince the Jews, that the promise of salvation through the Gospel was not limited to them by virtue of those particular privileges they enjoyed as the posterity of Jacob; but should extend to those who had been called, "not of the Jews only, but also of "the Gentiles;"—to all, of whatever age or country, who were willing to accept it, and to fulfil its conditions.

There is, indeed, a manifest difference between such privileges and those which relate to men's personal salvation. St. Paul does not undervalue the former; but he contends that they did not confer any exclusive right to the latter. He says, that to the Israelites "pertained the adoption, and the glory, and "the covenants, and the giving of the law, "and the service of God, and the promises; "whose are the fathers, and of whom as "concerning the flesh Christ came, who is "over all, God blessed for ever^k." But with respect to the spiritual benefits of the Gospel dispensation, he reminds them that God had foretold by his Prophet Hosea, "I will call "them my people which were not my people, "and her beloved which was not beloved^l;" clearly pointing out that the blessing should

^k Rom. ix. 4, 5.

^l Hosea ii. 23.

be extended to other nations not heretofore in covenant with him. The Apostle contends also, that concerning privileges of the former kind, no one had a right to complain of partiality or injustice on the part of the Almighty, in exercising his sovereign prerogative by the choice of any particular person, family, tribe, or nation, to be the depositaries, or the immediate instruments of his will. “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion^m:”—I will bestow on what people I think fit the peculiar and distinguished favour of being set apart from the rest of mankind for this special purpose:—and “it is not of him that willeth, nor “of him that runnethⁿ,”—it is not from any merits or pretensions of their own that they are thus selected, but from God, who is pleased to confer this blessing upon them. There was no unrighteousness in conferring these distinctions upon one rather than another; nor are we qualified to sit in judgment upon the fitness of God’s providential dispensations in this respect. He raises up such or such instruments for special purposes as he sees fit. “At sundry times and in divers “manners,” He hath manifested himself to a

^m Rom. ix. 15.

ⁿ Rom. ix. 16.

particular people, or to certain individuals, as if with greater solicitude for them than for others, but in reality for the good of all. When he thus chose the Jewish nation to be his peculiar people, and gave them special laws and ordinances, it was not only to distinguish them from the rest of mankind, but to make them the means of preserving true religion upon earth. Hence the Psalmist says, “He did not deal so with any nation, “neither had the heathen knowledge of his “laws^o.” All which the Apostle ascribes to the mere good pleasure and sovereign will of God; because these were tokens of favour to which none had an actual right, and which therefore might be granted to some, without injury to others on whom they were not bestowed. But this can never be said of the supposed arbitrary election of certain individuals, and the rejection of others, with reference to the promise of eternal life. Every attribute of the Deity, every declaration of his will in Scripture, stands pledged, as it were, that on this great point “there shall be “no respect of persons.” Here, then, is no absolute, unconditional, irrespective call, or election, to the Divine favour; but “the “grace of God, that hath appeared unto *all*

^o Psalm cxlvii. 20.

“men^p,” is extended to *all* who are willing to accept it; and will enable *all* who rightly apply it to “work out their own salvation.” Neither is there any other sentence of predestination gone forth, than that which we may conceive to be founded upon the Divine foreknowledge of every man’s personal conduct under the circumstances in which he may be placed.

With this clue to the Apostle’s application of the history of Jacob and Esau, I now proceed to examine some circumstances of the history itself, and of the parties concerned in it; which may, perhaps, throw still further light on the equity of the Divine proceedings.

Our judgment will be assisted in this respect, if we endeavour to carry ourselves into patriarchal times, so as to enter into the views and feelings of the parties implicated in this transaction.

From the earliest intimations that the Patriarchs had received of a future Deliverer, through whom “all the nations of the earth” should be blessed, great solicitude appears to have prevailed respecting the privilege of being the progenitor of the promised seed. The right of primogeniture was, in this point

of view, deemed of especial value ; and it appears throughout the patriarchal ages to have been stamped with somewhat of a sacred character. The solemn benedictions bestowed by the dying Patriarchs upon their children contributed to heighten these impressions ; since they were understood to convey spiritual as well as temporal privileges, and were not unfrequently accompanied with undoubted tokens of prophetic inspiration.

In the case before us, the right usually attached to primogeniture had not only been previously assigned to Jacob by the express declaration of the Almighty, but had also been actually transferred to him by the voluntary act of Esau himself ; who, in so doing, is said to have “ *despised* his birth-right,” and is called by the Apostle to the Hebrews a “ profane person ^q,” for shewing such disregard to a sacred prerogative. Nor was this the whole extent of his misconduct. He married into a heathen family ; and this alliance with an idolatrous people is said to have been “ a grief of mind unto Isaac and “ to Rebekah ^r,” and doubtless was offensive in the sight of God. Under these circumstances, there can be no doubt that it was

^q Heb. xii. 16.

^r Gen. xxvi. 35.

the duty of Isaac to withhold this privilege from the elder son, who was so unworthy of it, and to confer it upon the younger; and for his blameable endeavour to oppose the Divine purpose in this respect, we may imagine that God suffered him to be deceived by his own family. Some self-conviction of this kind may be discerned in his agitation of mind on the discovery of the deception that had been practised upon him. On Esau's return, "Isaac trembled very exceedingly, " and said, Who? where is he that hath taken " venison, and brought it me, and I have " eaten of all before thou camest, and have " blessed him? *yea, and he shall be blessed*^s." Though thus vehemently affected, he nevertheless instantly confirms the sentence which had already been given, in virtue of his former benediction, and in agreement with the declared will of the Almighty:—"Yea, and " he shall be blessed!"

Nevertheless, the conduct of Rebekah and of Jacob, in the deception of the aged Patriarch, is not to be justified on any correct moral principle, nor to be excused by any plea of carrying the Divine purpose into effect. It is a fundamental maxim of prac-

^s Gen. xxvii. 33.

tical religion, “not to do evil that good may come:” and here, faith in the promises of God ought to have overcome the temptation thus to transgress the plainest rules of duty. Far different was the conduct of Abraham, the father of the faithful, under circumstances infinitely more trying and distressful, when he received the command to sacrifice that very son respecting whom the promise had been made, that “in Isaac should his seed be called^t.” Trusting in the Divine power and veracity, he “accounted,” says the Apostle, “that God was able to raise him up, “even from the dead^u:” and therefore shrunk not from the most painful duty he could be called upon to perform. A similar trust in God’s promise, and a similar obedience to his commands, ought to have operated upon Rebekah and Jacob.

Respecting the conduct of Esau, little difficulty can arise. He met with the just reward of his deserts. He had contemptuously and profanely bartered away his highest and best privilege; and his lamentations for the loss of the blessing indicate a spirit of rancorous hatred and revenge towards Jacob, though not without humiliation for his own folly, and

^t Gen. xxi. 12.

^u Hebr. xi. 19.

a keen sense of the value of what he had lost. Yet he could not reasonably complain of any injustice done to him ; having himself forfeited his birthright, and treated it as nothing worth.

In whatever point of view, then, the subject be considered, the equity of the Divine proceedings stands clear, and nothing injurious to religion or virtue can fairly be deduced from it. It was the unquestionable prerogative of the Almighty to declare from whom the promised seed should spring ; and therefore we are not called upon to assign the probable grounds of preference for the younger son. Nor can it escape our notice, that when the rejection of Esau was thus foretold, it was unquestionably foreknown by the Almighty that Esau would, by his own misconduct, incur the forfeiture of his birthright. To the eye of Omniscience this must have been clearly discernible. Viewing the Divine decree, therefore, or the result of it, strictly in the light of *moral retribution*, it stands clear of partiality or injustice ; and affords a strong argument, that there is no arbitrary, unconditional predestination to happiness or misery, to honour or dishonour ; but that the moral government of the universe is guided by the most perfect recti-

tude and wisdom, though oftentimes surpassing our comprehension.

If, however, it be still objected, that the result of this transaction tends to give encouragement to deceit and falsehood; it may be sufficient to answer, that on the conduct of the several parties concerned we are still at liberty to exercise our free judgment; and that that judgment is to be formed by a reference to the pure and irreproachable standard of moral duty which Scripture itself sets before us. The successful result of any reprehensible action is never proposed to us in Scripture, and never ought to be urged on our part, as a test of the Divine approbation, or as a rule of conduct to ourselves. There is no doubt that the good providence of God can turn the most unlawful actions of mankind to a beneficial purpose; or render the misconduct of one person a salutary correction to the misconduct of another. But this makes no alteration in the moral character of the actions themselves, or in the moral guilt of the parties concerned. No man, therefore, may presume to take upon himself the execution, as he supposes, of the Divine purposes, by expedients contrary to the Divine laws. God's laws are given to us to walk by: His means of governing the world

he reserves in his own hands. Wherever the Divine injunctions or prohibitions are clear and express, by them we must abide: nor may any pretence of zeal for God's honour, or of the most laudable intention on our part, be pleaded in excuse for the breach of any one of His commands. By this inviolable rule we are to judge of every example recorded in Holy Writ, as well as of those which present themselves to our observation in the daily occurrences of human life.

The whole subject, then, whether we regard it as it is simply narrated by the sacred historian, or as it is commented upon by St. Paul, may be reduced within a narrow compass. St. Paul applies it in illustration of his reasoning to vindicate the Divine purpose of calling the Gentiles to a participation of the Christian covenant; and to warn the Jews of their rejection, if they continued in their unbelief. Notwithstanding the privileges which the Jews enjoyed as being first taken into covenant with God, it had from the beginning been declared by the Almighty that other nations should in due time be admitted to his favour, and the special pretensions of the Jews be set aside. Esau was a striking type of their stubborn and rebellious conduct

with reference to this circumstance. As he forfeited his birthright through his own wilful and inexcusable folly; so did they forfeit their prior claim to the benefits of the Gospel by their contempt and rejection of it. As the blessing intended by Isaac for Esau was bestowed upon Jacob; so the blessings of the Gospel covenant first offered to the Jews were conferred upon the Gentiles, while the whole Jewish nation was cast out and dispersed. The posterity of Esau, says the prophet Jeremiah, “shall be a desolation: every one
“that goeth by it shall be astonished, and
“shall hiss at all the plagues thereof^w ;” a prediction, equally expressive of the despised and afflicted state of the Jewish people, since their dispersion throughout the world.

In the history also of Esau and Jacob we are forcibly reminded of Solomon’s observation, “there are many devices in a man’s
“heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord,
“that shall stand^x.” We perceive how infinite Wisdom adapts all characters and all incidents to its good purposes, and renders them instrumental to the accomplishment of the Divine will. Hence we learn the folly of attempting to oppose that will. We learn

^w Jeremiah xlix. 17.

^x Prov. xix. 21.

also the duty, not only of submission to the Divine will, but of setting a just value upon the Divine blessings vouchsafed to us, lest we repent, too late, of our folly and ingratitude. To this application of the example of Esau we are expressly exhorted by the Apostle to the Hebrews: “For ye know,” says he, “how “ that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for “ he found no place of repentance, though “ he sought it carefully with tears^y.” In like manner, our repentance may come too late; when every blessing we have received has been “consumed upon our lusts;” and when we have forfeited our best claims as “children of God, and inheritors of the kingdom “ of heaven.”

By such reflections as these, and not by making it the groundwork of hazardous speculations on the Divine decrees, we may render this portion of Scripture, like all others, “profitable for reproof, for correction, for “ instruction in righteousness^z.” We may derive from it lessons of wholesome admonition, as to our reliance on the wisdom and goodness of God in all his dispensations of providence or of grace, and our entire obedience

^y Hebr. xii. 17.

^z 2 Tim. iii. 16.

to his will;—lessons, which will keep us steadfast in his faith and fear, and diligent so to “work out our salvation,” as to “make
“our calling and election sure.”

SERMON XIII.

PSALM xcvi. 2.

Clouds and darkness are round about him : righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne.

THE moral government of the world by an all-wise and all-powerful Disposer of events is one of those incontrovertible truths, of which no sincere believer in revealed religion can be supposed to entertain a doubt. It is a truth not only discernible in every page of holy writ, but virtually recognised in every perfection we ascribe to the Almighty, every service we acknowledge to be due to Him, every promise on which we rely for his favour, every threatening which constrains us to stand in awe of his displeasure. None of these can consist with the notion that the Supreme Being is wholly occupied in abstracted contemplation of his own nature and attributes, regardless of the concerns and the conduct of his creatures ; or with the persuasion that whatever befalls us is the result of blind

fatality, or philosophical necessity, affording no scope for wisdom, for foresight, or for moral retribution, in the occurrences of this sublunary world. Such theories are in direct contradiction to the very supposition of infinite knowledge, power, or goodness in Him, “in whom we live, and move, and have our “being;” and can only be maintained on principles hardly separable from atheism itself. They are worthy only of the libertine or scoffer, who “careth not for God, neither “is God in all his thoughts^a.”

But however consonant this great truth may be with every just principle of reasoning, or however congenial with the best feelings of our nature, it is not always in its results perceptible to human observation. It is a matter of *faith*, rather than of *sight*; not presented to us as an object of our immediate apprehension, but deducible from a belief of those attributes of the Deity, his omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence, which are in themselves inscrutable to mortal faculties. Intimately, therefore, as this truth is connected with our daily and hourly concerns, with our best encouragements to well-doing, and the strongest restraints upon our evil propensities, it is nevertheless to the light

^a Psalm x. 4.

of Revelation that we are indebted for that certainty and assurance which can render it effectually operative upon our conduct.

In the Scriptures the doctrine of a moral governor of the universe, superintending all its concerns, and rendering every thing subservient to His will, is written in characters so legible, “that he may run who readeth.” It is reiterated in every variety of expression, and with reference to every kind of occurrence. “Who is like unto the Lord our
“ God, who hath his dwelling so high, and
“ yet humbleth himself to behold the things
“ that are upon the earth?”—“Whatsoever
“ the Lord pleaseth, that doth he in heaven,
“ in the earth, in the sea, and in all deep
“ places.”—“He doth according to his will
“ in the army of heaven, and among the in-
“ habitants of the earth.”—“The Lord in-
“ creaseth the nations, and destroyeth them:
“ He enlargeth the nations, and straiteneth
“ them again.”—“God is the Judge: he put-
“ teth down one, and setteth up another.”—
“The horse is prepared against the day of
“ battle: but safety is of the Lord.”—“He
“ delivereth and rescueth.”—“He maketh
“ wars to cease, and restraineth the wrath of
“ man.”—“He killeth, and he maketh alive.”
—“He woundeth, and his hands make whole.”

—“ He bringeth down to the grave, and he
 “ bringeth up.”—“ Fire and hail, snow and
 “ vapour, wind and storm, fulfil his word.”—
 “ He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle,
 “ and herb for the service of man.”—“ The
 “ Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich.”—
 “ The race is not always to the swift, nor the
 “ battle to the strong, neither yet bread to
 “ the wise, nor yet riches to men of under-
 “ standing, nor yet favour to men of skill.”—
 “ Who knoweth not in all these, that the
 “ hand of the Lord hath done this ^b?”

These declarations are abundantly sufficient to remove every doubt from the mind of the sincere believer. Whence is it, then, that difficulties still seem to encompass the doctrine, when we endeavour to apply it to human affairs; and that the manifestations of it are so frequently clouded and obscured, as to be not only indistinct to our perceptions, but occasionally so perplexing as to render it almost hazardous to form a judgment of their purpose and design? How is it, that in any instance we are at a loss to reconcile passing events with the acknowledged attributes of the Deity, or with that distribu-

^b Ps. cxiii. 56. Ps. cxxxv. 6. Dan. iv. 35. Job xii. 23. Ps. lxxv. 7. Prov. xxi. 31. Dan. vi. 27. Ps. xlv. 9. Ps. lxxvi. 10. 1 Sam. ii. 6, 7. Job v. 18. Ps. cxlviii. 8. Eccles. ix. 11. Job xii. 9.

tion of moral good and evil which cannot but be the object of all the Divine dispensations?

The direct answer to these questions is contained in the words of the text;—"Clouds
"and darkness are round about Him; right-
"eousness and judgment are the habitation
"of His throne." The appeal lies from man's finite and imperfect conceptions to those attributes of the Godhead which are perfect and infinite. Faith propounds this solution; and reason accepts it in deference to that authority which is supreme. Nevertheless, having thus accepted it with reverence and submission, reason is not precluded from an humble endeavour to explore such indications of Divine wisdom in these proceedings as are not altogether hidden from our view.

It is indeed emphatically said of the Most High, that "His ways are not as our ways, nor His thoughts as our thoughts," that "His judgments are unsearchable, and His ways past finding out;" that His "path is in the great waters, and His footsteps are not known^c." And how should it be otherwise? Can it be that the wonders of providence, like the wonders of creation, should not surpass human conception? They bespeak unbounded knowledge of things past,

^c Isa. lv. 8. Rom. xi. 33. Ps. lxxvii. 19.

present, and to come; wisdom capable of combining these in one coherent, harmonious system; power to execute whatever that wisdom and that knowledge may design; goodness, to conduct every thing to the best final result. Such limited understandings as ours can no more comprehend these things within their grasp, than they can mete out the heavens with a span, or fathom the depths of the great abyss. And this applies equally to the moral as to the physical perfections of the Almighty. Unless we could foresee the consequences of every particular dispensation of Divine Providence both with respect to individuals and to whole communities; unless we could discern the thoughts and hearts of men, as well as their words and actions; unless we could determine with certainty what course of moral discipline is best adapted to the respective characters and conditions of those who are under the Divine control—in other words, unless we were gifted with Divine perfections; it is impossible that we should in every case (or perhaps in any) be able so entirely to penetrate the “clouds and darkness” which surround the Supreme Ruler of the universe, as clearly to discern the “righteousness and judgment” which nevertheless we believe to be “the habitation of

“ his throne.” Yet still the contemplation of the subject, under due limits and restrictions, may be productive of substantial benefit. Whether applied to the events that befall individuals, or to the destinies of states and empires, much may be learned, both from what we can and what we cannot develope, to solace and support us in our earthly pilgrimage, and to vindicate the ways of God to man.

First, then, we may observe, that with respect to the dispensations of Providence affecting men individually, the moral system by which they are administered appears to be purposely so framed and constituted, that happiness is in a great degree made dependant upon a conscientious discharge of duty. With reference to merely temporal advantages, religious obedience to the Divine will has an obvious tendency to enhance the enjoyments of this present life, and to mitigate its sufferings; and this so evidently, that instances to the contrary, arising from extraneous circumstances, may be considered but as exceptions (and those not of ordinary occurrence) to the general rule. This affords a strong presumptive argument that the system itself is not the precarious result of chance,

but the effect of a wise and benevolent purpose, ultimately to be made still more manifest. Nor is it sufficient to overthrow this well-grounded assurance, that in particular instances the operation of the system may be but indistinctly perceptible, or may even seem to be at variance with this supposed purpose of the Almighty. It is enough that we are able to discern in its general outline clear indications of benevolence in the design; the infinite power, wisdom, equity, and truth of HIM from whom it proceeds affording a sufficient pledge that in every part of it the same benevolence will finally prevail. For where benevolence unites with those other attributes of a Being all whose perfections are infinite and illimitable, there cannot but be both the will and ability to effect ultimate good; and what we know and perceive of this, within our present limited and imperfect sphere of observation, lays a solid foundation for trust and confidence in that which is beyond our reach.

The supposition, however, of this connection, with respect to individuals, between goodness and happiness, sin and misery, is far from being defective in substantial evidence. A large proportion even of the phy-

sical evils to which men are personally liable may be traced to actual sin, as the immediate or the predisposing cause. Moral evil confessedly springs from this source only. To be free from both these, constituted the perfect bliss of that state in which man was first created, and so long as he continued without sin. Since his fall, both have been more or less intermingled in the lot of every individual of the human race, and consequently, perfection either in goodness or happiness, in this present state, has become unattainable. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for us to judge respecting either ourselves or others, what proportion of good or evil, of enjoyment or suffering, any individual may expect at the hands of his Creator, during this his probationary state of existence. We can only be assured of the general maxim, that “all things work together for good to them that love God^d.” By what means or after what preparatory discipline they may so work, it is beyond our power to ascertain. The corrupt nature we have inherited not only leads us “in many things to offend,” and thus to incur the penalty of disobedience; but may render a certain portion of suffering and

^d Rom. viii. 28.

trouble requisite, as the preventive of greater evils. Adversities of whatever kind, pain, sickness, sorrow, need, losses, disappointments, may be necessary for subduing stubborn affections, controlling licentious appetites, correcting false views of human life, and elevating the mind above sordid and worthless pursuits, to such as will reward it with an ampler and nobler recompense. Even these may therefore justly be regarded as indications of a supreme power benevolently exercised in bringing good out of evil ; of an all-merciful Being that “ doth not willingly afflict his “ creatures “,” but “ pitieth them like as a “ father pitieth his own children ^f.”

So far, then, as relates to the troubles and adversities which happen to the righteous, the obscurity of the Divine proceedings is far from being such as to warrant any feelings of distrust. But a more fruitful source of complaint is derived from the apparent prosperity of the unrighteous and disobedient.

Here, however, considerations somewhat similar may be brought to our aid. As the present recompense of the righteous must be understood to include both internal and external advantages ; so in estimating the present retribution of the wicked, their internal dis-

^e Lam. iii. 33.

^f Psalm ciii. 13.

advantages must be taken into account, together with those outward evils which may be attendant on their misconduct. Viewed in this aspect, a great preponderance of evil in their condition, as compared with that of the righteous, will almost invariably be found. To this view of it St. Paul forcibly arrests our attention, when he says, “What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death^g.” Three special evils of an iniquitous course of life are here noted by the Apostle; its *unsatisfactoriness* in the commencement, the *shame* which immediately follows it, the *final punishment* that awaits it. To these evils, or even to the expectation of them, we can hardly suppose any person so insensible, as not to suffer from them a great diminution, at least, of enjoyment, under whatever outwardly prosperous circumstances; and in whatever proportion he may thus suffer from his evil doings, the vexation brought upon him may well be regarded as an evidence of that “righteousness and judgment” which, notwithstanding some occasional obscurity, still evidently encircle the throne of the Most High.

But with respect to their outward condi-

^g Rom. vi. 21.

tion also, it is emphatically said by Solomon, that “the *prosperity* of fools shall *destroy* “them :”—a fearful and indisputable truth ! Even the success of the wicked, here denominated *fools*, tends to their destruction. Often is this verified in the ordinary events of human life. Often do we see that the very attainment of their object serves but to render the ambitious, the fraudulent, the voluptuous, so much the more headstrong and precipitate ; inciting them to greater enormities, and to become reckless of the dangers that beset them, until some sudden reverse involves them in irretrievable ruin. The domineering appetite or passion, encouraged by present impunity, brooks no restraint, and is made the victim of its own excess. And what is this again, but an additional proof that Providence hath ordained such a retribution of sin, even in our present state ? What is it but an awful lesson to mankind in general, that outward prosperity is not always what it seems to be, an evidence of the Divine favour ; but may be sent for the chastisement of him who glories in it ; that then only it is to be deemed a blessing, when it is the concomitant of goodness ; and that it altogether loses that character, when combined with moral depravity and corruption ?

Thus, though, with respect to mere external appearances, there seem to be “but one event to the righteous and to the wicked^h,” the very same events may operate with entirely different effects upon opposite characters. In the one they may tend to evil, in the other, to good; to the one, the dispensations of providence or of grace may be “a savour of death unto death,” to the other, “a savour of life unto lifeⁱ.” Apart, therefore, from those views of a future state, (which nevertheless ought always to be taken into account in the consideration of this subject, as the period when even every seeming irregularity in the Divine proceedings shall be finally adjusted and rectified,) there is nothing in the present moral government of the world, with respect to men’s individual concerns, which should stagger the faith of the righteous, or encourage the impenitence of the wicked. The perception of happiness or misery attached to the consciousness of rectitude or of guilt, heightening or diminishing the sense of present good or evil, in itself bears testimony to the equity of the Great Judge of all the earth, and should “put to silence the ignorance of foolish men^k.”

Having thus endeavoured to clear the sub-

^h Eccles. ix. 2.

ⁱ 2 Cor. ii. 16.

^k 1 Pet. ii. 15.

ject, as it affects individual happiness or misery ; let us now inquire whether these or similar considerations may not also be applied to those greater dispensations of Providence which govern the destinies of states and empires.

Our perplexities here are increased by our not being able to connect this part of the subject with the retributions of a future state. Yet we cannot but perceive how greatly the conduct of nations, collectively considered, must influence the moral interests of mankind. We are wont, therefore, to look for so much clearer indications of Divine interposition in their rise and fall, their greatness and decay. Here, however, the very magnitude of the case should make us so much the more diffident in forming our judgment. Upon this, if upon any point, it especially becomes us to retreat within that sure position, “ Shall not the Judge “ of all the earth do right¹ ? ” To this question there can be but one reasonable answer ; and that answer must ever be borne in mind. Whether this or that dispensation of God’s providence, affecting the large and complicated interests of whole communities, bear distinct marks of the Divine wisdom

¹ Gen. xviii. 25.

and rectitude, may be more than we can presume to determine, unless we adopt this inviolable maxim as the basis of our inquiry. This, however, being laid down as the first principle on which we build our reasoning, we cannot greatly err in our endeavours to discover the probable intention of the Almighty in any such visitations either of chastisement or mercy, and in regulating our own conduct and expectations according to the best anticipations we can form of the eventual result.

History bears ample testimony to the truth of the Wise Man's saying, "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach unto any people^m." There is not, perhaps, an instance upon record of the decline and fall of any nation, which had not first rendered itself justly obnoxious to the Divine displeasure. From the tremendous judgment which swept away the whole race of mankind, (one family alone excepted,) to that dreadful visitation which utterly destroyed the Jewish city and government, and scattered the people among all nations; no instance is recorded in holy writ of the extinction of any one people, or of any grievous calamities overtaking them, which does not appear to have

^m Prov. xiii. 34.

been inflicted in chastisement of their offences. When Sodom was doomed to destruction, the Lord declared that he would not destroy it, if ten righteous persons could be found within itⁿ. When the nations of Canaan were exterminated, it was not (as the profane scoffer would represent) for the mere purpose of bestowing their territory upon a favoured people, but for the punishment of whole communities sunk in idolatry, and incorrigibly addicted to the most odious impieties and immoralities of which human nature is capable. When similar judgments in after-times were denounced and executed upon other nations, both the threatenings and calamities were accompanied with express declarations of the sins which occasioned them. The burden of Babylon, the burden of Egypt, the burden of Tyre, the burden of Nineveh^o, the denunciations against an impious chief or a wicked people, usually set forth (if we may so speak) the very grounds and reasons of the Divine proceedings, as if to cut off all occasion of doubt or cavil as to the equity of the sentence.

In the records of profane history, the same express testimony is not to be expected. Yet

ⁿ Gen. xviii. 32.
Nahum i. 1.

^o Isaiah xiii. 1. xix. 1. xxiii. 1.

the careful observer will seldom fail to perceive a similar connection between national offences and adversity on the one hand, and national rectitude and prosperity on the other. Evidence to this effect may be gathered, not only from the events themselves, but also from the observations of historians (however unintentionally on their part) respecting the causes, proximate or remote, which led to their respective results ; as well as from the more elaborate disquisitions of writers who have professedly applied themselves to the investigation of the true sources of national prosperity. From these combined authorities we may deduce satisfactory proofs of the connection between what the Scriptures denominate *righteousness*, and what statesmen mean by *political greatness*. The scriptural term *righteousness*, as applied to national character, is that rectitude and integrity of which pure and sound religion—the love of God and the love of man—is the basis. *Political greatness*, in any proper acceptation of the term, must be that by which a people is raised in the estimation of other nations ; that by which it commands their respect and confidence, and possesses a preponderating influence in their counsels and their measures for the general good. This

character never was, nor ever will be, separable from *moral* excellence; and moral excellence, whether in communities or individuals, is equally inseparable from a steadfast adherence to *religious* principle. Thus are public and social interests, no less than private, interwoven with the duties we owe to God and man. In the ordinary course of things, therefore, national prosperity will be the effect of national virtue and religion: and this in itself is a striking evidence that “God will *judge* among the nations^p,” and that he ruleth over the kingdoms of the earth according to his unerring wisdom, equity, and truth.

But will the facts of history bear us out in this representation? Is such a retribution generally exemplified in the records of nations? Do not splendid crimes often pave the way to an enormous increase of national strength and power, even to an unbounded extent of dominion over the rest of mankind? And do not virtuous and unoffending states often suffer under the heavy hand of some gigantic usurper or oppressor, fearing neither God nor man? Are not these impenetrable clouds thrown over the supposed dispensations of the supreme Arbiter of the world?—Cau-

^p Isaiah ii. 4.

tion, on every side, is necessary, in attempting to answer these questions ;—caution, that we neither hastily arraign the justice of the Almighty in suffering such things to take place, nor deceive ourselves in framing imaginary and delusive theories to clear away the mystery that we cannot fully penetrate.

We are accustomed to speak, perhaps, somewhat too familiarly of God's moral government of the world, as if we were discussing some philosophical treatise on the law of nations, or some human code of political institutes ; forgetting our inability to embrace in one view such a combination of interests, public and private, local and universal, temporary and perpetual, as those which the supreme Being surveys in one comprehensive view ; together with the bearings of these upon ages past, present, and to come ; upon the welfare of myriads already gone, or now in existence, or who are yet to perform their part on this sublunary stage. Without a full knowledge of these, who may presume to say that any one important occurrence in history may not have been necessary for some wise beneficial purpose, however to us indiscernible ; forming an essential part, perhaps, of that vast, stupendous whole, in

which the omniscient and omnipresent Mind sees and directs every thing from the beginning to the end of time.

Nevertheless, without indulging presumptuous speculations, something may even here be suggested to allay any painful solicitude.

The ordinary effects of religion and virtue upon the happiness of nations, we contend, are such as fully vindicate the general dispensations of Providence in this respect. The seeming exceptions to this rule, we contend also, are by no means sufficient to prove that wickedness is ever conducive to national welfare, although it may for a while contribute to national aggrandizement by an increase of its power or an extent of its dominion. The internal state of such a people, however much its external strength be augmented, may be, and usually is, full of misery proportioned to its wickedness; while even the most depressed condition of a virtuous state may continue in possession of the purest and most enviable enjoyments. Neither can it be proved that national crimes and delinquencies ever promote real political greatness. For if (as has already been argued) that greatness consists in a preponderating and salutary influence upon other powers, by commanding general respect and confidence; then is it evident,

that the greater the power of a corrupt and vicious community, the greater must be the abhorrence and the distrust entertained of it by all other communities ; and although it be suffered, for some providential purpose, to go forth as a scourge or a warning to the rest of mankind, in the exercise of its destructive energies ; yet this may only continue until it shall have answered that especial purpose ; or until, having filled up the measure of its iniquities, it become ripe for destruction, and eventually work its own degradation and ruin. On the other hand, the very nations who suffer from the devastations of such an iniquitous power may be destined by the Almighty to exhibit edifying examples of faith and patience, of magnanimity and resolution ; and at length be more than recompensed for all that they have endured for righteousness' sake.

Upon the whole, our reasoning upon the ways of the Almighty, whether applied to nations or to individuals, is substantially the same. In both, there is ample evidence that “ His righteousness standeth like the strong
“ mountains, and His judgments like the great
“ deep^q ;” that these constitute, if we may so speak, the established rule of His proceedings

^q Psalm xxxvi. 6.

in the ordinary course of human events ; and that nothing repugnant to that rule can be clearly proved, even where there appears to be the greatest deviation from it, since there may be, and probably must be, various purposes connected with such occurrences which we are unable to discern, but which we nevertheless are bound to believe, and have sufficient reason to believe, are founded upon the same basis of perfect and unerring wisdom, as well as of infinite goodness, which characterize every known act of their Divine author and Disposer.

Let this, then, be our confidence under every circumstance and in every condition of life, private or public. Let it be our wholesome restraint in the day of prosperity, and “our refuge in the needful time of trouble.” In our personal concerns, let it teach us humility and patience, moderation and contentment ; to pursue the path of duty with a steadfast and unruffled mind ; not disheartened by disappointment, nor intoxicated by success ; not presuming upon the continuance of blessings which can never be at our own command, nor cast down by evils which the same God who inflicts them is able to remove. In public events, let it also teach us to beware both of despondency and of presumption.

“ The Lord reigneth ; let the earth rejoice^r.” Great indeed is the motive for rejoicing, that whatever troubles or perplexities arise, that Power who “ ruleth over all^s,” “ can still,” not only “ the raging of the sea, and the noise of “ the waves,” but “ the madness of the people^t.” Great is the satisfaction to be derived from a firm and undoubting conviction, that although “ clouds and darkness are round about Him,” yet “ righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne.” No less awakening, on the other hand, is the call to seriousness and repentance, in the reflection that when that Power goeth forth to execute His “ judgments in the earth,” it is that “ the inhabitants of the earth may learn righteousness^u ;” that they may “ stand in awe, and “ sin not^v,” and “ turn from their evil ways, “ and live.”

Thus, in every point of view, does the subject present to our minds the strongest motives individually to cultivate every Christian grace and virtue, and collectively to approve ourselves “ a people fearing God and working “ righteousness ;” ever bearing in mind, that, with reference both to this world and to the

^r Psal. xcvii. 1.

^s Psal. ciii. 19.

^t Psal. lxxv. 7

^u Isaiah xxvi. 9.

^v Psal. iv. 4.

next, “ Verily there is a reward for the
“ righteous: doubtless there is a God that
“ judgeth in the earth^w.”

^w Psal. lviii. 11.

SERMON XIV.

ISAIAH V. 20.

Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.

OF the state of morals under the monarchies of Israel and Judah, the strong expositions and denunciations of their own Prophets lead us to form but an unfavourable opinion. Scarcely a chapter occurs in any of these writings, from which we may not infer such a general state of depravity as would be a reproach to any people; more especially so to a nation distinguished above all others by laws and statutes and ordinances of Divine institution, and placed under the immediate superintendence of an extraordinary Providence, enforcing obedience to those laws by frequent and manifest interpositions of miraculous agency. That even under such a dispensation so many public offences and private vices should have pre-

vailed, to the extent which the Prophets declare, may well excite our astonishment. Of the truth of this statement, however, the chapter of the Prophet Isaiah, from which the words of the text are taken, supplies sufficient evidence. It opens with an affecting appeal to the chosen people of God, reminding them of the signal blessings they enjoyed. Under the similitude of a vineyard, cultivated with peculiar care, is represented the unceasing desire of the Almighty to afford them the means of improvement in every grace and virtue, and the just expectation that their conduct should correspond with these advantages. “What could have been done more,” says the Prophet, in the name of the Almighty, “for my vineyard, that I have not “done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that “it should bring forth grapes, brought it “forth wild grapes?” Then follows a series of denunciations descriptive of the prevalent depravity and corruption. Covetousness and rapacity, intemperance and luxury, contempt of the revealed will of God, perversion of moral and religious principle, presumptuous confidence in human strength and wisdom, sensual indulgence and corrupt administration of justice; these are the subjects of the several woes denounced by the Prophet; com-

prising a fearful catalogue of national and individual sins. Among these, the denunciation in the text is directed against one, the most comprehensive in its character, and the most formidable in its result; being nothing less than a general perversion of principle; a sort of mental obliquity or blindness, darkening the understanding, misleading the judgment, and polluting the very sources of rational enjoyment: “Woe unto them that call
“evil good, and good evil; that put darkness
“for light, and light for darkness; that put
“bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.”

This corruption of principle is of all moral disorders the most incurable. To error, infirmity, and occasional lapses from what they know and acknowledge to be their duty, the best of men are liable. But from these, by timely reflection and consideration, they may be reclaimed. Even vicious habits, grown inveterate by long continuance, are known sometimes to yield to powerful correctives. But if the moral principle itself be unsound, if that conscience, whose province it is to give warning of our danger, be under the dominion of persuasions repugnant to our duty, the case, as far as human means can operate, becomes hopeless. Then, in the strong language of the Prophet, “the whole head is

“ sick, and the whole heart is faint^a.” Every thing is viewed through a distorted medium. Favourite vices assume the character and colour of amiable or heroic virtues. Ingenious sophistries, visionary theories, perplexing subtleties, are extolled as the perfection of human knowledge. Schemes of happiness are formed upon false estimates of human life; and shadows of enjoyment are substituted for the realities of solid satisfaction.

In the sacred writings we are frequently cautioned against such delusions, and exhorted to hold fast those primary moral and religious truths which constitute the basis of “ a conscience void of offence.” “Unto the “ pure,” says St. Paul, “ all things are pure : “ but unto them who are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure ; but even their “ mind and conscience is defiled^b.” “ Take “ heed,” says our blessed Saviour, “ that the “ light which is in thee be not darkness^c :” and again, “ Salt is good : but if the salt have “ lost its saltness, wherewith will ye season “ it^d?” Admonitions of this kind clearly warn us of the evils which must ensue from corrupting those sources of moral perfection, whence alone truth, or knowledge, or happi-

^a Isaiah i. 5.

^b Titus i. 15.

^c Luke xi. 25.

^d Mark ix. 50.

ness, in the proper acceptation of the terms, can be derived.

So little solicitous, however, do the unreflecting part of mankind appear to be for the preservation of this integrity of principle, that they listen willingly to every plausible teacher, who, under the specious show of philosophy, or of spiritual illumination, imposes upon them as truths, notions the most irreconcilable with those which issue from the fountain of truth ; little aware, that tenfold strength is thus added to the inborn corruption of their nature ; to their passions, appetites, affections ; to all those powerful incentives to evil, which even the best regulated understandings and the firmest resolutions are not always able to withstand.

With some, this seems to originate in that contemptible vanity which takes delight in maintaining a sort of indiscriminate warfare with all established maxims, under whatever sanction they come recommended. *Truth*, and *knowledge*, and *happiness*, they affect to regard as matters of *opinion* only, not to be tied down to any fixed and unchangeable rules. In words they do not indeed deny the absurdity of calling evil good, and good evil ;—but they ask, *What* is good, and *what* is evil ? Shew us any one maxim in morals,

in philosophy, in religion, that never has been controverted? Shew us any one imputed error or absurdity in either, which has not had its advocates and abettors, among persons neither mean in intellect, nor wilfully perverse in judgment. Where, then, is the universal standard to be found? Or by what authority are one man's tenets to be established as the criterion of another's? *Reason*, every man's *own* reason, is to each individual his sole authoritative guide.

Such are the rhapsodies with which the ears of sober-minded men are daily annoyed:—rhapsodies, which might be excusable in heathen ages; but which cannot easily find an apology where the light of Revelation has been vouchsafed. The earnest inquirer after truth may well exclaim with the Psalmist, “There be many that say, Who will shew us
“any good? LORD, lift THOU up the light of
“THY countenance upon us^e.” It is the comfort, the happiness of the Christian believer, to have a surer, safer, and clearer guide, than mere OPINION. It is his theme of daily thanksgiving that he is not left to explore his way, without a clue to direct him through the labyrinths of speculation and conjecture; but has only to walk in the plain

^e Psalm iv. 6.

straight path marked out for him by supreme Wisdom itself. He troubles not the vain disputers of the world to instruct him in what *the chief good* of man consists; because he already rests upon an authority which no perfection of man's judgment can strengthen, no perverseness of human ingenuity set aside.

To him who has no more reverence for the word of God than for the word of man, such assurance cannot, indeed, be given; and he must be left to enjoy as he may his boasted independence, and the satisfaction of selecting from an infinity of doubtful maxims and positions those which he deems the least doubtful. But to the believer in the Gospel, one clear and solid text of Scripture will outweigh all these dreams of human invention. The *good* which the Christian speaks of, is that which the Scriptures describe as good; the *evil*, that which *they* declare to be evil; the *light*, is that which God hath been pleased to communicate to us by Revelation; the *darkness*, that which shuns and opposes it; the *sweet*, is that tranquil frame of mind which a conduct conformable to Revelation produces; the *bitter*, that wretchedness, to which all who reject its influence are reduced.

The offence, then, against which the denunciation in the text seems to be directed, is that of *presumptuous opposition to Divine truth*; that of making human opinion the standard of moral duty; and following our own devices, rather than obeying the laws which God hath given us.

That such perverseness is not altogether confined to unbelievers, truth compels us to acknowledge. Under many a fair show of reverence for religion is concealed a strong predilection for that sovereignty of individual opinion, which of all incentives to error is perhaps the most prevailing. Much of this may be ascribed to the practice of grounding moral duties upon principles distinct from those of revealed religion; a mode of philosophising which has long been in high repute, and sanctioned by names justly admired and revered in the Christian church. Yet if the bulk of mankind are led to conceive that morality and religion are in their nature separable from each other, obvious are the difficulties, the perplexities, the uncertainties, which may be expected to arise. What is to prevent men, in their researches after truth, virtue, and happiness, from relapsing into the endless diversities and contradictions of heathen philosophy? Who shall judge between

the conflicting systems? Or how can we expect to bring men to one mind, even upon the most essential points of duty, where faith and practice, religion and morality, are kept apart from each other, and are viewed rather as rivals and opponents, than as friends and co-adjutors in the same cause?

Nor is the case materially different, when, in framing systems of ethics, philosophy and religion are admitted to a sort of co-equal authority. If two distinct modes of arriving at moral truth be adopted; one, the deduction of reason from principles of expediency, fitness, utility, or any other supposed ground of obligation, independent of Divine sanction; the other, resting exclusively upon Divine authority; the incongruity of treating these as of equal force and obligation is striking. It weakens that which ought to command, and strengthens that which ought to be in subjection.

For the same reason, when men professedly receive the revealed will of God as the supreme guide in faith and practice, but will suffer it to control them no farther than they can reconcile it to their own notions of what its doctrines and precepts ought to be; the result will be equally unsatisfactory. The order of things is inverted. The unerring

will of the Divine legislator is made to bend to human fallibility. Man's wisdom, man's opinion, man's imagination, man's reason, or man's will, usurps the prerogative which belongs only to "the wisdom that is from above," to that supreme Judge, the rectitude of whose decisions it is no less unreasonable than irreverent to call in question. The individual who acts thus, may be unconscious of any sinister motive, unconscious of the least intention to pervert the truth, and fully persuaded of his own integrity and singleness of heart. Nevertheless, if, instead of the humble spirit which "brings every thought into "captivity" to the will of God, strong internal persuasions are suffered to overrule that authority, or to hold even a divided empire in the mind; no surety can be given for the consequence. The main spring of action is disordered; and all the subordinate movements are liable to irregularity, to uncertainty, to error. The intellectual operations are disturbed; the moral feelings are drawn in different, perhaps in contrary directions; and under this jarring system too often it will be found, that good and evil, light and darkness, bitter and sweet, usurp the place of each other, till mischief and confusion inevitably ensue.

In ascribing these consequences, however, to the undue usurpation of human judgment over that authority to which every thing human is bound to submit, far be it from us to decry the proper use of human reason in morals and religion, or to give countenance to that delusive and degrading fanaticism, which would abandon every exercise of our intellectual faculties, and reduce us to mere machines in the hands of a Superior Power exercising an irresistible influence over our wills and affections. Neither let it be imagined that we would depreciate the labours of those excellent men in the heathen world, who, unenlightened by Revelation, exercised their transcendent talents in the investigation of moral truth, and framed systems of conduct from which we at this day may derive much solid wisdom, much valuable instruction. Nor let it even be inferred from what has been said, that the light of Revelation has absolutely superseded the utility of these researches. The study of ethics as a science is among the noblest occupations of the mind. In theory, it is capable of all that perfection of systematic arrangement, which renders every branch of knowledge more distinct, more clear, and easy to be apprehended. In practice, it connects itself

with whatever is most interesting to us, collectively or individually, as social beings. Not even the highest attainments of physical science tend equally to elevate and dignify our nature, or can place us equally high in the scale of being to which we naturally belong.

It is not, then, to such men as Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero, in former ages, or to such as Cudworth, Cumberland, or Clarke, in later times, that the censure is to be applied of adulterating moral truth by any perversion of principle, or of culpably neglecting higher and better sources of knowledge. The virtuous heathen could not slight that treasure which he had never possessed, nor shut his eyes to that light which had never shone upon his path. Neither does the Christian moralist disparage the faith he has received, by shewing its conformity with that which genuine and unsophisticated reason might demonstrate to be the duty of man towards God, his neighbour, and himself. The labours, whether of these earlier or later sages, ought rather to be regarded as tending to dispose mankind to receive with greater readiness, and a more cheerful submission, that pure and perfect knowledge of the truth which the Gospel supplies, and which rests upon wisdom and authority infinitely sur-

passing any to which the utmost extent of human ability can pretend.

But the utility of these speculations has its limits. Now that “the day-spring from “on high hath visited us,” we are no longer dependent on the success of such inquiries, for light and information to “guide our feet “into the way of peace.” The chief danger now to be apprehended is that of presumptuously “leaning to our own understandings^f,” and substituting some fallible imaginations of our own for that truth which cannot err. This danger can only be averted by a steadfast adherence to the revealed will of God, as paramount to every other authority.

It is not to be denied, that the fundamental principles of moral duty are deducible from a correct view of the fitness of things, of general expediency, of the known relations which subsist between man and his Maker, and between man and man: nor is it to be questioned, that there prevails generally among mankind a consciousness of obligation to regulate the conduct by what they recognise to be right and good. But in the application of these principles, and even in the establishment of the principles themselves, there is a liability, at least, to error; and

^f Prov. iii. 5.

there is a defect, an insuperable defect, of adequate sanction and authority to enforce them. Here revelation comes in as supreme in judgment. Human fallibility is corrected by infallible wisdom. Human authority is controlled by divine. The standard of morals is thus elevated to a higher pitch. Virtues become duties ; vices become sins. Obligation springs from the purest of all sources, obedience to the Divine will ; and is sanctioned by the most influential of all motives, the assurance of eternal rewards and punishments.

This is briefly the state of the question between ethics abstractedly considered, and ethics considered as associated with the faith and promises of the Gospel. It is not that they are essentially, or in any respect necessarily, at variance with each other ; but that the weight of security, of certainty, of authority in the one case, infinitely preponderates over that in the other. They may, and doubtless they will coincide and harmonize, if each be rightly understood. But where this coincidence and harmony may seem doubtful or defective, it is evident which ought to yield. If the inquirer cannot gainsay the Divine character of the one, it will be in vain to oppose to it the most specious

reasonings of the other. He will rather mistrust his own judgment, and that of the most discerning of mankind, than call in question the declarations of holy writ.

It is when these obvious rules of judgment are disregarded, that the danger is incurred of “calling evil good, and good evil;” of “putting darkness for light, and light for “darkness;” “bitter for sweet, and sweet “for bitter.” And if any doubt could remain of the probable result, we have but too abundant confirmation of it before our eyes. For to what other source can we trace the pestilential doctrines incessantly obtruded upon us, by men “wise in their own conceits,” and discarding all other wisdom than their own? The attempts of scoffers in the present day to bereave us of our hope and confidence in the Gospel, cannot but excite our pity and indignation;—our pity for those who are victims of the delusion, our indignation towards the authors and abettors of the evil. But it may tend to open the eyes of those who have hitherto been indisposed to see the full extent of the mischief, that already its influence upon a large portion of the community is felt, in an increased propensity to turbulence and discontent, and in a perceptible diminution of that abhor-

rence of *moral turpitude* which serves as an almost instinctive safeguard against many atrocious offences. It needs no laboured arguments to prove, that when a quickness of perception with regard to moral evil, and the sense of shame attending it, are lost or blunted, the case is beyond the reach of ordinary methods of correction. This, however, follows as the natural and almost necessary consequence of loosening the hold which religion has upon the mind, and without which, the sense of honour or of shame, notions of moral fitness or expediency, theories of vice and virtue in the abstract, are feeble, very feeble securities for public or private conduct.

Within the last thirty years, what a lesson has been read to us on this subject! How much anarchy and bloodshed has been the fruit of miscalled philosophy and reason usurping the throne of the Most High! What destruction and havoc have been their attendants! How many new codes have been palmed upon mankind as the perfection of human wisdom, substituting insubordination and insurrection for obedience and social order; incredulity and scepticism, for faith and hope; unrestrained indulgence of liberty and appetite, for conjugal fidelity and pa-

rental restraint. Morals, politics, truths of every kind, have thus been sapped in their very foundation, until the broad distinctions set before us in the word of God, between good and evil, light and darkness, happiness and misery, have been well nigh obliterated and forgotten.

If such, then, be the fruits which these mischievous principles produce; let it be remembered, that every departure from the revealed will of God is an approach to this. It is opening a way for the uncontrolled operation of passion or imagination, and abandoning the mind of fallen man to its native infirmity and corruption. Against these evils there is no effectual safeguard but a resolute adherence to sacred truth. So long as that is duly revered, no one can deliberately confound evil with good, or good with evil. He may occasionally, through ignorance or inadvertency, mistake the one for the other. Practically also, he may sometimes pursue the one instead of the other. But when reflection returns, when he sees his error, and betakes himself again to his heavenly Guide, his conscience cannot but warn him of danger, and his understanding take the alarm. Not so with him who acts upon *opinion* only, or upon *false principle*. Under the influ-

ence of *false principle*, conscience itself misleads;—under that of *opinion*, it has but a precarious hold. None but the commanding voice of a DIVINE Legislator will be heard with effect, amidst the conflict of unruly appetites and contending passions.

Happy, then, is he who builds upon the rock of FAITH; against which the winds and waves, the storms and tempests of adversity, of error and falsehood, of reproach and calumny, of hatred and persecution, will beat in vain. Fortified by the assurance of Divine support, trusting in the mercies and promises of a gracious Redeemer, and upholden by that Holy Spirit which “strengthens him with might in the inner man^g ;” he will have for his portion internal confidence and tranquillity; verifying the Prophet’s declaration, “the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever^h.”

^g Ephes. iii. 16.

^h Isaiah xxxii. 17.

SERMON XV.

PSALM lxi. 33.

Seek ye after God, and your soul shall live.

WHEN the holy Scriptures speak of the soul of man as liable to decay and death, and requiring continual nourishment for its preservation and support, the expressions can only be understood in a figurative sense; nothing being more clearly revealed to us, than that the spiritual part of man partakes not of the perishable nature of his bodily frame, nor can ever cease to exist, but by a special act of the Almighty in its annihilation: and that such an act of omnipotence never will be exerted, the assurance of a future and eternal state of being, for which the souls of the wicked as well as of the good are reserved, affords most decisive proof.

It is only by analogy, therefore, and for the purpose of engrafting upon that analogy such instructions as might not otherwise be

so easily apprehended, that the soul is represented to be capable of growth and decay, of health and sickness, of refreshment and languor, and ultimately of death ; since, literally understood, whether we “ seek after God,” or seek Him not ; whether we grow in grace, or fall short in spiritual attainments ; our souls shall certainly live : they shall live to partake either of the everlasting enjoyments of the righteous, or of the endless miseries of the wicked.

Nevertheless, the figurative meaning of these expressions is not difficult to be understood. For, as the life of the body depends upon its union with the soul, so what is called the life of the soul (denoting its state of happiness and perfection) depends upon its union with God :—and as the death of the body is the consequence of its dissolution or separation from the soul, so that which is called the death of the soul, (denoting its depraved condition and its consequent consignment to misery and perdition) is the effect of its departure from God, and the loss of the Divine favour. And again ; as the growth, and health, and vigour of the body depend upon its proper food and nourishment ; so the improvement of the soul and its capacity of enjoyment are derived from the proper

use and application of those means which God hath provided for its advancement in holiness and virtue.

The life of the soul, then, being understood to denote its present enjoyment of good, and its assurance of eternal happiness ; the Psalmist admonishes us in the words of the text, that this is to be obtained by *seeking after God* :—“ Seek ye after God, and your soul “ shall live.” The whole inquiry, therefore, arising out of this portion of Scripture, is what we are to understand by “ seeking after “ God,” and what is promised as the result of so doing.

To “ seek after God” is a phrase of considerable latitude ; and, if not cautiously interpreted, may lead to extravagances, both in opinion and in conduct, detrimental to the Christian character.

Strange notions have been entertained by mystics and enthusiasts respecting the necessity of holding communion with God, in modes altogether visionary and fanciful, unauthorized by any Divine injunctions, and tending to dangerous delusions. In almost every age of the Christian church, there have been not only individuals, but entire sects, pretending to inconceivable abstractions of the mind from bodily and temporal concerns ;

to perceptible influxes and illuminations of the Holy Spirit; and to secret and unutterable converse with the Almighty, imparting to them, as the chosen objects of His favour, light, and knowledge, and sanctity, unattainable by the rest of mankind.

To arrive at such a supposed pre-eminence in holiness, many have been induced to renounce the ordinary duties of society, to lead a life of total seclusion and solitude, to practise the most repulsive austerities, to dissolve the ordinary ties that unite man to man, and to prohibit the most harmless gratifications; to aim, in short, at making man “a new creature,” not in the sense in which the Scriptures use that phrase, not by a just conformity to the pattern which our Lord set before us, nor by practically adapting the precepts of Scripture to our respective callings and conditions of life,—but by an absolute desertion of duty in these respects, and by a forced and monstrous change of our essential properties as human beings.

An ancient persuasion, (the offspring of a corrupt philosophy introduced at a very early period into the Christian church,) that there is evil necessarily inherent to matter, and that, consequently, the body is the cause of all the pollutions and disorders of the soul,

led to these vain attempts to disunite the one from the other ; and eventually, led also to the rejection of some most important articles of the Christian faith. The sect, or rather the accumulation of sects, which in the first century of the Church were distinguished by the general appellation of Gnostics, were the prototypes of numerous heresies in after-times, affecting marvellous attainments by their intellectual abstractions ; and from these branched out other sects pretending to spiritual gifts of still more wonderful efficacy ; by means of which they conceived themselves able to attain to flights of piety and heavenly mindedness far above the ordinary reach of man in his present earthly state. By many of these in almost every age and country, the profession of the Christian faith has been made an object of derision to the scorner, and of aversion and disgust to men of sober understandings. To enumerate the various sects of this description, and to shew their connection with each other, would be to form a compendium of a large portion of ecclesiastical history, and might furnish materials for voluminous discussion. It will be found, however, that notwithstanding the infinite varieties that occur of mysticism and fanaticism, they for the most part agree in their

general character, and are reducible to one class of error. Whether the eccentricity manifest itself in ecstatic transports of mind, in violent agitations of the animal spirits, in rigorous acts of penance and cruel macerations of the body, in imaginary suggestions of the Holy Spirit directing every trivial thought, word, and action, or in supposed communications with the Deity by perceptible impulses and revelations; the origin of the error is the same. It is the mistaken notion, that we must “seek after God” in some other way than HE hath directed us; and that we can not have access to Him, but by some extraordinary and preternatural means necessary to the attainment of Christian perfection.

That errors of this kind have sometimes been accompanied with the best intentions, there can be no doubt. But it is equally certain, that nothing may be more easily assumed for the purpose of deception, than the exterior of such sanctity as this. Imposture never more successfully pursues its object, than when it acts under the semblance of enthusiasm. Then it is, that, as St. Paul expresses it, “Satan is transformed into an “angel of light^a.” The deceiver presents himself to others as a model of transcendent

^a 2 Cor. xi. 14.

piety and purity : and they who are unstable and unwary may the more easily be deluded to become his followers. This renders it necessary that even the really pious and well-disposed should be careful how they adopt opinions bordering upon such extravagances ; lest by giving encouragement to enthusiastic views of religion, however plausible and harmless in appearance, they should unwarily involve themselves or others in notions or practices not reconcilable with that sober-mindedness, that well-regulated zeal and discipline, which characterises a truly Christian life and conversation.

Let us, then, proceed to inquire, how we are to “seek after God” in the more correct acceptation of the phrase.

1. In a general sense, every one may be said to “seek after God,” who, with that intent, searches the *Holy Scriptures* ; investigating by the light of Revelation the nature and perfections of the Almighty, His will with respect to man, His precepts and prohibitions, His promises and threatenings, and whatever relates to the terms of our acceptance with God. It is in these Scriptures only that we can “by searching find out the “Almighty to perfection^b,” or “find rest

^b Job xi. 7.

“unto our souls^c.” To know whence we came, and whither we go; to learn our origin and our destination; to ascertain what God hath done, or purposeth to do for us; and how we may obtain His favour, which is better than life itself;—this is properly “seeking after God:” and the soul may then be truly said to live, to be alive to its best interests and to the great purpose for which a being was given to it, when it is thus employed in acquiring a knowledge of the Divine will, and in applying that knowledge to the glory of God and its own eternal welfare.

Some, however, appear to be of opinion that this knowledge may be sufficiently obtained without recourse to Revelation; God having manifested himself (as they conceive) so clearly to our senses and to our natural understandings, as to make any further discovery of himself superfluous. And true it is, that the book of nature, as it may be called, that manifestation of the Divine attributes and perfections which is every where conspicuous in the visible world, justly claims its share of contemplation and research on the part of those who “seek after God.” “The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein^d.”

^c Matth. xi. 29.

^d Psalm cxi. 2.

They supply abundant evidence in corroboration of what is revealed in the sacred oracles concerning the Deity; and all who diligently search among these for proofs of His infinite wisdom, power, and goodness, will (unless they enter upon the inquiry with an “evil heart of unbelief”) soon perceive that God “hath never left himself without witness” of His adorable perfections. But the study of these, without due deference to the written word of God, much less in opposition to that word, will rarely be sufficient to produce even a general conviction of those truths on which our hope and trust in Him are mainly grounded. To this let the stubborn generation of infidel philosophers bear witness; who, while they profess to seek for proofs of a deity among the works of nature, are too often disposed to deify nature itself, instead of its Divine author, and to “worship the creature rather than the Creator.” Nor will cavils and exceptions ever be wanting against the Creator himself and the works of his hands, where there is no predisposition, through faith in His word, to acknowledge Him as the sovereign good, the fountain of all wisdom and perfection.

2. But, secondly, to “seek after God,” for

^e Acts xiv. 17.

the more immediate purpose of obtaining life for the soul, implies that we maintain an habitual intercourse with him in the exercise of *prayer*. “Prayer,” says a distinguished master of devotional subjects, “is the great duty, and the greatest privilege of a Christian: it is his intercourse with God, his sanctuary in troubles, his remedy for sin, his cure of griefs.”

That the Almighty, who “dwelleth in the light which no man can approach unto^f,” should vouchsafe to hear the prayers of “all such as call upon him faithfully^g,” and that “in his faithfulness he will answer them^h ;”—is a truth, for the certainty of which we are wholly indebted to Divine Revelation. *There* it is declared to us in the most unequivocal terms. By the faithful under the Old Testament, we may collect from the writings of every one of its inspired authors, it was generally known and acted upon. Under the Christian dispensation, it is still more distinctly set forth, and inculcated by new arguments of unanswerable weight. “Verily, verily,” saith our Lord to his disciples, “whatsoever ye shall ask the Father *in my name*, He will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my

^f 1 Tim. vi. 16.

^g Psalm. cxlv 18.

^h Psalm cxliii. 1.

“ name : ask, and ye shall receive, that your
 “ joy may be full.” And again ;—“ Ye shall
 “ ask in my name : and I say not unto you,
 “ that I will pray the Father for you : for the
 “ Father himself loveth you, because ye have
 “ loved me, and have believed that I came
 “ out from Godⁱ.” Here the efficacy of prayer
 is guaranteed to the disciples by the special
 mediation of Christ himself, as well as by the
 general love which the Father bears towards
 them. And that this assurance, though ad-
 dressed personally to the Apostles for their
 consolation on the eve of his departure from
 them, may nevertheless be extended to *all*
 sincere believers, we learn from the Apostle to
 the Hebrews, who, adverting to their “ great
 “ High Priest, Jesus the Son of God,” exhorts
 them to “ come boldly to the throne of grace,
 “ that they may obtain mercy, and find grace
 “ to help in time of need^k.”

Thus to be permitted on every occasion,
 and in our most secret retirements, to pour
 out our hearts before God with a full confi-
 dence that He who knoweth the heart will
 administer to its necessities, soothe its griefs,
 allay its disquietudes, and heighten its joys,
 is a privilege of which every sincere Christian
 must be supposed desirous to avail himself.

ⁱ John xvi. 23—27.

^k Hebr. iv. 16.

Nor will he be content with performing this duty in private only; but will be ever ready to bear public testimony to God's mercy and truth, and to say with the Psalmist, "I have
 "not hid thy righteousness within my heart;
 "I have declared thy faithfulness and thy
 "salvation: I have not concealed thy loving-
 "kindness and thy truth from the great con-
 "gregation¹." For since our Lord hath assured us, that "where two or three are ga-
 "thered together in his name, there is he in
 "the midst of them^m," no acts of private devotion can supersede this still higher duty of assembling ourselves together "in the place
 "where his honour dwellethⁿ," and where the promise of his especial presence warrants the expectation of especial blessings.

3. But, thirdly, it will not suffice to "seek
 "God" either in his *word* or in private and public *prayer*, unless we seek him also in those *ordinances* which he hath appointed for our communion with him, and more particularly in that highest act of Christian worship, *the sacrament of the Lord's supper*.

Under what character and for what purpose doth the Christian profess to "seek after
 "God?"—Is it not, that he may "return
 "unto the Lord, that he may have mercy

¹ Psalm xl. 10.^m Matth. xviii. 20.ⁿ Psalm xxvi. 8.

“ upon him ;” and to his God, in confidence that he will “ abundantly pardon ° ?” And in what is this confidence placed, but in the atonement made for us on the cross, by “ that “ Lamb of God which taketh away the sins “ of the world ?”—Now since the holy eucharist is expressly ordained for the thankful commemoration of that sacrifice, and to be the instrumental means of our participation in its benefits, our duty in this respect is placed beyond all doubt. It becomes on these grounds an indispensable act of communion with God. For, as St. Paul argues, “ The cup of blessing which we bless, is it “ not the communion of the blood of Christ ? “ The bread which we break, is it not the “ communion of the body of Christ ^p ?” And hath not our Lord himself said, “ Except ye “ eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink “ his blood, ye have no life in you ^q ?”—This then is a service in which, above all others, we may be said to “ draw nigh to God ;” in which “ we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us ; we “ are one with Christ, and Christ with us.”

Thus far, then, there is no difficulty in determining by what kind of devotional exercises we may most effectually “ seek after “ God.” The expression is easily interpreted

° Isaiah lv. 7.

p 1 Cor. x. 16.

q John vi. 53.

to denote the regular and habitual practice of contemplating God's word and his works, of resorting to him in prayer, and of applying to our own spiritual improvement those outward and visible signs of grace, which he hath ordained for the purpose of strengthening us in the inner man. Here is no scope for superstition or enthusiasm; nothing at which the rational and well-disciplined Christian can take offence. Nor do we hereby interdict any other means which individual Christians may deem expedient for their own particular improvement. Doubtless it is characteristic of every sincere and devout believer, to seek the favour of God by an entire conformity to his will, by endeavouring to be perfect even as he is perfect, by striving to attain to that elevation of sentiment, that relish for spiritual things, by which the soul may be said in the fullest and best sense of the word, to *live*; not merely to exist in a neglected and unprofitable state, but to advance more and more to perfection, until at length it may become meet to partake of its heavenly inheritance.

It is, however, of infinite importance to guard against the extremes both of excess and defect, in our pretensions to Christian piety. For while some are disposed to ri-

dicule every attempt at these attainments, others will regard even those which have been here described as little better than “beggarly elements” of Christianity, characteristic of mere formalists, who content themselves with the husks of religion, and have no perception of its internal excellence. The advocates of sober-minded piety seldom meet with willing hearers among the multitudes who are ever eagerly inquiring after something new and plausible. Extremes in religion find many whose temperaments are adapted to their respective latitudes: while the middle region, promising no such prodigies as the extremes are wont to produce, has little to attract their notice. Hence the increase of indifference and apathy on the one hand, and of fanatical excitement on the other; —the former denying any Divine influence on the heart of man; the latter so entirely yielding to imaginary spiritual impressions, as to conceive that nothing depends on their own cooperation, nor that any efficacy is to be attributed to outward means of grace. As on the one hand, however, it is difficult to understand how any persons can be said to “seek after God that their souls may live,” who reject all belief of Divine impressions on the heart and the understanding; so, on the

other, it is not easy to perceive how the admonition to “seek after God” can by them be rationally applied; since the very expression, *seeking*, seems to imply some actual efforts of their own. If, in the whole concern of our salvation, we are to be merely passive instruments in the hand of God, waiting for some extraordinary communications of His Spirit, without a concurrent operation on our part; why should we “seek after God” in the holy Scriptures, or in prayer, or in the sacraments; when the work, as such persons imagine, can only be effected by an irresistible influence from above, which we can neither expedite nor retard by any exertions of our own?

To guard against both these extremes, let us ever bear in mind, that the whole system of our redemption presupposes two great fundamental truths—the free grace of God, and the free agency of man. If God’s free grace had not provided the means of pardon and sanctification, in vain had man attempted to discover them. If man’s free agency were not called forth, the Divine wisdom and goodness had been exercised upon mere machines incapable of resisting or of conforming to His will. This is the evident foundation of St. Paul’s comprehensive rule of conduct, “Work

“out your own salvation; for it is God that
 “worketh in you both to will and to do of
 “his good pleasure^r ;” and also of St. Peter’s
 exhortation, “Grow in grace, and in the
 “knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ^s.”
 Neither of these exhortations can be made
 practicable, or even intelligible, unless we
 acknowledge the certainty of God’s help on
 the one hand, and the necessity of our own
 cooperation with it on the other. The faith-
 ful Christian has indeed abundant reason
 both for humility and for confidence, for
 trust in God and for diligence in his Chris-
 tian calling. He has moreover abundant
 reason frequently to examine his own spiri-
 tual state, and to consider whether he has
 proceeded or retrograded in the course he has
 to run. He must be careful neither to trust
 too much to inward feelings, always liable to
 mislead him with fallacious representations,
 nor to mere outward acts of devotion, which
 are only then efficacious when they are tokens
 of what really exists in the heart and the af-
 fections. The measure of self-examination
 and of self-discipline necessary for thus per-
 fecting the Christian character, must be re-
 gulated by many circumstances of personal
 consideration, of temperament, habits, abilities,

^r Phil. ii. 12.

^s 2 Pet. iii. 18.

station in life, and opportunities of whatever kind, of which the individual alone can be a competent judge. But it is every man's concern—a concern of awful responsibility—that he be not here a self-deceiver; and it will be every man's wisdom to “judge himself” as to these particulars, “that he be not judged of the Lord^t.”

The practical application of the whole is this. Our spiritual life, the hope and consolation we have now within us, together with the assurance of more perfect and endless enjoyment hereafter, depends on our “seeking after God” in the way which HE hath appointed, not in fanciful devices of our own. Our direct access to Him is by meditation, by prayer, and by the sacraments. These are the instituted means of grace; these are the ordinary helps towards working out our salvation; and their efficacy, if diligently and faithfully applied, will, through the merits and mediation of Christ our Saviour, be certain and complete. But this effect can only be certified, either to ourselves or others, from their influence on our hearts and lives. “By their fruits ye shall know them^v.”

Here is a plain general rule, by which all must be tried hereafter; and by which all

^t 1 Cor. xi. 31.

^v Matth. vii. 20.

may now prove themselves, whether their proficiency in godliness be such as to afford good ground of hope and confidence. Here too are ample reasons why we should “give all diligence to make our calling and election sure^w.” Nor is any thing required towards the attainment of this end, for the neglect of which a reasonable excuse can be pleaded. That which God hath made the duty of every one, He hath made it also practicable for every one to perform. He is not the hard task-master, “reaping where he hath not sown, and gathering where he hath not strawed^x.” It is only “the wicked and slothful servant” who will dare thus to “charge God foolishly^y.” Our heavenly Father hath given to us all talents and opportunities sufficient for what he will require at our hands. And when He commands us to “seek after Him, that our souls may live,” He urges us by the strongest motive that can actuate the human heart. For “what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul^z?”

^w 2 Peter i. 10.

^x Matth. xxv. 24.

^y Job i. 22.

^z Mark viii. 36.

SERMON XVI.

1 JOHN iv. 19.

We love Him, because He first loved us.

THE love of God is a principle of duty which distinguishes revealed religion from every system not of Divine original.

The heathen had no correct knowledge of this principle. It was neither recognised in their popular theology, nor did it enter into the disquisitions of their philosophical teachers. By the ignorant worshippers of numberless imaginary deities;—deities of various conflicting passions and interests, and distinguished many of them by the most flagrant enormities—it was impossible that sentiments of love or reverence towards them could be seriously entertained. An abject dread of their displeasure, or some base motive for seeking their favour, could alone affect their deluded votaries; and even this could operate no further than to induce the performance of

some worthless ceremonies, neither significant of better things, nor productive of any virtuous feelings. The philosopher, on the other hand, the more refined inquirer after truth, however sincere and ardent in his pursuit, laboured almost equally under the want of such a knowledge of the Supreme Being as Revelation only can supply. Though he might attempt to gloss over the absurdities and the abominations of that Polytheism which he dared not openly disavow, by clothing its fables in the specious garb of allegory; yet were his speculations respecting the one true God involved in almost impenetrable obscurity. How, then, could he inculcate the *love* of that Being whose essential perfections he had it not in his power to declare; of whose purposes and proceedings, past or future, he was almost wholly ignorant; and to whom he knew not either the extent or the nature of his obligations? Whatever conjectures he might be led to form of the perfections of such a Being, proofs of the Divine love towards mankind, sufficiently strong to remove the perplexities which beset his path, would still be wanting: and until these could be found, vain would be the endeavour to render this principle a solid basis of moral obligation.

Modern infidelity stands also in this respect upon scarcely firmer ground than heathenism itself. The advocate for natural religion, in opposition to revealed, may indeed deduce from the visible works of the creation arguments both physical and moral, of considerable weight, to prove the Divine regard for man. But he can penetrate little farther into them than the pagan philosopher; nor will he “be able,” as the Apostle expresses it, “to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge^a ;” that love, which is nowhere fully unfolded but in the sacred page of revelation.

Under the Jewish dispensation, the love of God was indeed expressly laid down as the ground of obedience to His will. It was made the stipulation of every blessing; and on the want of it were entailed the heaviest denunciations. The special mercies vouchsafed to the chosen race of Abraham were urged as prevailing incitements to this affection; and one great purpose of the Mosaic laws and institutions was to keep it alive and strengthen it. The wonders wrought for this people in Egypt and in the wilderness, the miraculous

^a Ephes. iii. 18.

overthrow of their enemies, their settlement in the promised land, their continued preservation and increase under manifold circumstances of difficulty and distress, these were subjects continually brought to their recollection by their inspired teachers: and upon the ground of such obligations every neglect of the service of God, every infringement of His laws, incurred the just reproach of ingratitude to their heavenly benefactor.

But in proportion as spiritual blessings exceed the greatest temporal benefits, so does the Christian dispensation transcend the Jewish. Very extraordinary were the tokens of God's favour manifested towards his people Israel. "He had not dealt so with any nation; neither had the heathen knowledge of His laws^b." Yet even these peculiar marks of regard fall infinitely short of the mercies of that universal redemption wrought for both Jew and Gentile, by Him whom the prophet emphatically styled "the Sun of Righteousness," who should "arise with healing in his wings^c."

Upon this inexhaustible subject St. John delights to dwell. Throughout his first Epistle, he expatiates upon the Divine goodness manifested in the Christian dispensation.

^b Psalm cxlvii. 20.

^c Malachi iv. 2.

From this he deduces the duty we owe to one another, as well as the duty we owe to God. “Hereby,” says he, “perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren^d.” “He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins^e.”

St. Paul urges the same considerations. “God,” says he, “commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us^f.”—“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?—Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord^g.”

To the like effect our Lord himself states the gracious purpose of his coming. “So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life^h.”—“Greater love hath no man

^d 1 John iii. 16.

^e 1 John iv. 8. 10.

^f Rom. v. 8.

^g Rom. viii. 35. 38, 39.

^h John iii. 16.

“than this, that a man lay down his life for
“his friendsⁱ.”—“A new commandment I
“give unto you,” (new, that is, as to the peculiar obligation on which it is founded,) “That
“ye love one another; *as I have loved you,*
“that ye also love one another^k.”

Hence we learn upon what foundation the great duty of love to God is understood to rest. It is comprehensively stated in the text;—“We love HIM, because HE first
“loved us;”—This is a principle which instantly approves itself to our understandings; a principle, not grounded on elaborate deductions of reasoning, but on sentiments obvious to the apprehensions and congenial to the general feelings of mankind.

Two main points, then, remain to be considered; first, how the love of God has been manifested towards us;—secondly, how we are to manifest our love towards HIM. Upon both points let us take St. John for our interpreter and guide.

1. That greatest proof of God’s love to mankind, which Revelation has unfolded to our view, is thus briefly set forth by St. John;—“In this was manifested the love of God
“towards us, because that God sent his only-
“begotten Son into the world, that we might

ⁱ John xv. 13.

^k John xiii. 34.

“live through Him¹.” This comprises the whole substance of the Christian redemption, and is that which the sacred writers chiefly dwell upon, when they magnify the Divine mercy and goodness. Other instances of that goodness are indeed frequently referred to, both in the Old and New Testament. The wonders of creation and preservation; the manifold blessings bestowed upon us by an all-bounteous Providence; that moral retribution even in the present life, which gives encouragement to the righteous, and warns the wicked of the danger of his ways;—these and numberless other topics occur in almost every book of sacred writ; and a comparison of them with the most admired passages of heathen authors, or the most distinguished works of philosophy ancient or modern, will immediately evince their infinitely superior excellence, even on these more obvious points of consideration. But when the inspired penmen treat of the spiritual blessings conferred upon man, their emotions of wonder and gratitude are raised to the highest pitch. Upon these they build their main arguments, conscious, as it were, that when once presented to the human mind in their full force,

¹ 1 John iv. 9.

they could hardly fail to convince the understanding, as well as to affect the heart of every reasonable being.

Who, indeed, can contemplate the Divine goodness displayed in the redemption of mankind, without acknowledging it to be such as it surpasses our utmost efforts adequately to conceive? Whether we regard this inestimable blessing with reference to the unworthiness of the objects whose disobedience had deprived them of any well-founded hope of favour, or to the means by which they are rescued from destruction;—the gratuitous mercy extended towards them while yet the demands of Divine justice are no less effectually provided for, may well excite our astonishment and admiration.

“ Herein is love,” says the Evangelist, “ not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” It was, “ not that *we* loved God, but that *HE* loved *us*.” Every act of sin, every transgression or omission of duty, is an indication either of our forgetfulness or our disregard of *HIM*. The mercy therefore that interposes under such circumstances for our good, is not merely gratuitous and unmerited, but it is an exercise of the very highest species of love, that of being “ kind unto

“ the unthankful and to the evil^m.” It is that of “ loving enemies,” of “ not recompensing evil for evil, but contrariwise, blessingⁿ ;” a disposition which our Lord sets forth as the great characteristic of our heavenly Father. When we add to this the utter impossibility of extricating ourselves from the state into which our actual offences as well as our corrupt nature had brought us, St. Paul’s animated expressions of admiration and gratitude cannot but recur to our thoughts, “ O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God ! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out^o !”

Again, when we contemplate the means vouchsafed for recovering us from this state, we are no less impressed with the justice than with the mercy of the Divine proceedings. “ Mercy and truth,” says the Psalmist, “ are met together : righteousness and peace have kissed each other^p.” The same dispensation that brought “ peace on earth, and good will towards men,” proclaimed also, “ Glory to God in the highest^q.” That no less an expiation was accepted than that of the spotless victim offered up on the cross,

^m Luke vi. 35.

ⁿ 1 Peter iii. 9.

^o Rom. xi. 33.

^p Psalm lxxxv. 10.

^q Luke ii. 14.

declares more strongly than language can express, the purity of a Being to whom no satisfaction can be made that bears the stain of guilt. The gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed to help our infirmity, and to lessen the burden of our corrupt nature, reads a similar lesson of instruction. The atonement, the mediation, the intercession, made for us, all tend to one and the same conclusion, that the dignity, the holiness, the immutability, the sovereignty of the Omnipotent, were no less exemplified in the whole of this great mystery, than his compassionate tenderness and his paternal love. Taking this combined view of the several parts of the proceeding, from the incarnation and birth to the sufferings and death, the resurrection and ascension, of the Son of God; we find such transcendent greatness and majesty united with the lowliest and most benignant condescension, as never did, nor ever could have entered into the heart of man to conceive, had not the reality been presented to his contemplation.

2. Let us, then, consider, secondly, how we are to manifest our love towards HIM, who hath thus manifested His love towards us.

“We love Him,” says St. John, “because He first loved us.”

By assigning this as the proper ground

and motive of our love, the Evangelist virtually repudiates all visionary notions of this feeling; and in the course of this Epistle he clearly shews that the true and proper manifestations of this love consist in obedience to the Divine commands, in benevolence towards our fellow-creatures, in purity of heart and conduct, and in a well-grounded confidence in the Divine favour. Many, it is probable, have occasionally suffered distress of mind from an apprehension that they are deficient in that love of God which the Scriptures enjoin, because they are not conscious of invariably acting upon that principle in the general concerns of human life. Although they are accustomed to perform the external offices of religion with a serious conviction of their indispensable obligation; and are earnestly desirous of irreproachably discharging their social and their personal duties; yet, not being thoroughly satisfied that all these are done from a pure, abstract love of God, they fear that in the balance of the sanctuary they must be found so entirely wanting, as to bring them into condemnation. And just ground there might indeed be for such apprehensions, did we serve a God who is “extreme to mark what is done amiss,” or were there no atonement made

for our manifold defects of duty as well as for more aggravated offences; no Intercessor for transgressions duly repented of, no Comforter to support us under the sense of humiliation which must ever be felt, when we reflect that even our best services are utterly unworthy of the Divine acceptance, but through that dispensation of grace and mercy which is offered to us that we may “find rest unto our souls.” With respect, however, to this source of uneasiness in particular, the view which, as we have already stated, St. John takes of the true and proper manifestations of our love to God, may tend to allay any disquieting apprehensions.

1. “Whoso keepeth His word,” says St. John, “in him verily is the love of God perfected^r.” This is one test which admits not of prevarication or delusion. And it is the same which our Lord proposes to His disciples:—“If ye love me, keep my commandments^s.” St. John does not even allow that a man can have a real knowledge of God, much less a love of Him, where this proof is wanting:—“He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not his commandments, “is a liar, and the truth is not in him^t.” All pretences to zeal for God’s service, or to ex-

^r 1 John ii. 5.

^s John xiv. 15.

^t 1 John ii. 4.

traordinary fervours of devotion and internal feelings of piety, are to be suspected as spurious, if there be not a conformity in the disposition and the conduct with the known will of God. And on the other hand, where this latter evidence of right sentiment is manifest, disquieting doubts and scruples respecting our inward perception of it may be discarded. For it is as a rule of action, not as a mere abstract feeling, that this is required of us; and though the love of God be “the first and great commandment,” the primary source of all duties and of all obligations, yet are we permitted, nay, enjoined to pay regard to those secondary and subordinate motives of conduct, which the various relations of social life suggest to us, and which our own personal well-being renders indispensable. Therefore, whenever we conscientiously discharge those obligations, making our duty to God the paramount motive, we in effect fulfil the will of God, and approve the sincerity of our love towards Him. This is evidently St. John’s view of the subject, when he says, “Let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him^v ;” we shall

^v 1 John iii. 18, 19.

know, that is, assuredly, that our love of God is sincere and acceptable in His sight, by such substantial proofs of its influence upon our hearts and lives.

2. Another token insisted upon by St. John is *benevolence* towards our fellow-creatures: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also
“to love one another.—If we love one an-
“other, God dwelleth in us, and His love is
“perfected in us.—If a man say, I love God,
“and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he
“that loveth not his brother whom he hath
“seen, how can he love God whom he hath
“not seen? And this commandment have we
“from Him, That he who loveth God love
“his brother also.” It is impossible to express in stronger terms the indispensable, or rather the inseparable, union of these two principles. For though a mere instinctive affection for our species, or even higher sentiments of benevolence, may exist and operate to a considerable extent, without regard to the Divine will; yet such a regard cannot but greatly heighten all the benevolent affections. Where a true love of God prevails, there the truest love for mankind will also prevail. No testimony of our love can be more acceptable to Him, than that which coincides with

w 1 John iv. 11, 12, 20, 21.

His merciful and benevolent regard to our fellow-creatures. If *we* are His people, so are *they*; if He hath wrought *our* redemption, so hath He wrought *theirs*; if the gifts of His Holy Spirit are bestowed upon *us*, so are they upon *them*. There is a fellow-feeling between man and man in all that belongs to this gracious dispensation, which renders it impossible that we should entertain a just sense of our obligations to the Divine author of it, without an earnest desire to cooperate in all its benevolent purposes.

3. A further token of our love to God is *purity* of heart and conduct. “Behold,” says St. John, “what manner of love the Father
“hath bestowed upon us, that we should be
“called the sons of God!—Beloved, now are
“we the sons of God, and it doth not yet ap-
“pear what we shall be: but we know that
“when He shall appear we shall be like Him,
“for we shall see Him as He is. And every
“man that hath this hope in him purifieth
“himself, even as He is pure^x.”—This purity does not consist in vain attempts to abstract the spirit from the body, or to anticipate now in our earthly state the perfections of that glorified state which we hope to inherit hereafter; but in rendering all our faculties sub-

^x 1 John iii. 1, 2, 3.

servient, as far as human infirmity will permit, to the perfect will of God. To act with reference to that will; to regulate by it our thoughts, words, and deeds; to “love the thing which He commandeth, and to desire that which he doth promise;” these are sure evidences that our hearts are fixed upon Him, and that we indulge no purposes or inclinations in opposition to His.

4. One more test which St. John proposes, as the result of these, is a well-grounded *confidence* in the Divine favour:—“Beloved, if our hearts condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God^y.” The ground of this confidence he more particularly states in the verses immediately preceding the text: “Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear; because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love^z.” If our love of God be well-founded, if it spring from a firm persuasion of His goodness towards us, and of His desire that we should attain to eternal life; it will produce that effect upon our hearts and lives, which will give us confidence in the fulfilment of His

^y 1 John iii. 21.

^z 1 John iv. 17, 18.

gracious purposes. It will enable us to look forward to the great day of retribution without dread; it will cast out tormenting fears and disquietudes; which can only take possession of the mind where there is a want of that firm trust in God's promises which is the blessed privilege of the just and faithful, or where there is a consciousness that the love of God cannot be extended towards us, because we ourselves are at enmity with Him, and are acting in opposition to His will.

Here, then, we may close the subject. The love of God, as inculcated in holy writ, is a perfectly rational affection;—it is grounded upon those sentiments which most generally and most powerfully actuate the human mind. It springs from gratitude for the greatest blessings; from veneration for the Divine perfections; and from a strong sense of personal interest in the exercise of those perfections for our own individual benefit. It is no fanciful, no romantic passion. The root and foundation of it lies deep in the human heart, and is common to us all. The proofs of its actual existence and of its constant operation are open to general observation. They are indicated by habitual acts of piety, of benevolence, of purity, and of cheerful trust in God; not by mystic flights of imagination, not by extravagant eccentricities

of conduct. “We love God because HE first “loved us:” and as the proofs of God’s love to *us* are neither “in the height” above our faculties, nor “in the depth^a” beyond our penetration to discover; so neither are the proofs of *our* love to HIM beyond the reach of plain and sober understandings.

But that this powerful spring of action may never fail, it will be necessary that we look well to the source from whence it flows. From Revelation only we can derive the full knowledge of that goodness in which it originates. *There* is revealed to us that “mystery of godliness,” in which the proofs of Divine mercy and compassion are most conspicuous. These let us earnestly contemplate, and endeavour to fix them in our recollection. They can hardly fail to give a higher elevation to our thoughts and sentiments, to weaken the power of temptation, and to strengthen that of virtuous resolution. They will expand our benevolence towards *man*, in proportion as they incite our gratitude towards God. Under every circumstance, and in every condition, they will enable us to feel the full force of the Evangelist’s emphatical declaration, “This is the “victory that overcometh the world, even our “*faith*^b.”

^a Isaiah vii. 11.

^b 1 John v. 4.

SERMON XVII.

1 CORINTHIANS xiii. 13.

*And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three :
but the greatest of these is charity.*

IN this comprehensive text of Scripture is contained, in substance, a general epitome of the Christian character. It marks those peculiar features which essentially distinguish the disciple of Christ from the followers of every other religion. These features are more or less strikingly discernible, in every one who has thoroughly imbibed the spirit of the Gospel; and the Apostle regards them as inseparable from each other:—"Now
"abideth faith, hope, charity, these three :
"but the greatest of these is charity." In other parts of his writings they are mentioned severally as well as jointly in the same strain of commendation. "By grace
"ye are saved through *faith*^a." Again, "we
"are saved by *hope*^b." And again, "the end
"of the commandment is *charity*, out of a

^a Ephes. ii. 8.

^b Rom. viii. 24.

“ pure heart, and of a good conscience, and
“ of faith unfeigned^c.” Their union, therefore, and their cooperation are evidently assumed to be necessary for the attainment of salvation. Each when alone is spurious or imperfect. Then only are they genuine and effective, when they mutually adorn and strengthen each other. This will still more clearly appear when we examine the appropriate qualities of each, as they are represented to us by the Apostle himself.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews *faith* is defined to be “ the substance of things hoped
“ for, the evidence of things not seen^d.” It is “ the substance of things hoped for.” It gives us as strong and firm a persuasion of what we at present only look for and expect, as if it were already realized. It certifies us of what is past many ages ago, as decidedly as if it were now before us ; and it gives us a foresight of what is yet to come, with almost the same lively trust and confidence that we experience in what is actually present to our contemplation. It is “ the evidence
“ of things not seen.” By the instrumentality of faith truths imperceptible to the natural sight are revealed to our mental perceptions. With respect to these, the dis-

^c 1 Tim. i. 5.

^d Hebr. xi. 1.

cernment of the believer is called a spiritual discernment, to distinguish it from that which is exercised in human philosophy, conversant only with the works of the visible creation ; and hence it is emphatically said that the Christian “ walks by faith, not by sight^e.” To creatures born for immortality in a world to come, there are many things “ hoped for,” and many things “ not seen,” concerning which we necessarily feel great solicitude. The nature of God, his attributes and perfections, his providence in the administration of human events, the imperfect distribution of good and evil in this present state of our existence, the nature of man, his origin and destination, the duty he owes to his Maker, the means of obtaining the Divine favour, his hopes and expectations of eternal life ;—these are subjects on which a rational being cannot but feel desirous of some positive and certain information. Yet are they utterly beyond the reach of his own natural faculties. They are doubtful speculations, and must for ever have continued so, had not God been pleased to reveal them in such measure and degree as is necessary for our immediate comfort and edification. It is faith only, a firm reliance upon God’s own testimony, that gives us any competent know-

^e 2 Cor. v. 7.

ledge of these truths. Faith embodies, as it were, that which is otherwise unsubstantial and visionary. Without it, says the Apostle, “it is impossible to please God^f.” We cannot please Him, because we know not His will; we cannot obey Him, because we know not His commands.

The same Apostle gives us a striking representation of the nature of Christian *hope*, when he calls it an “anchor of the soul, both “sure and steadfast^g.” It implies a firm assurance that all the promises of God will in due time be fulfilled. This assurance is the immediate result of faith. It originates in a full persuasion of the unchangeable veracity of God, and of His infinite power, wisdom, and goodness. It rests on that simple and comprehensive declaration, “He is faithful “who hath promised^h.” By this, Abraham was sustained, when, “against hope, he believed in hope,” and “staggered not at the “promise of God through unbelief, being “fully persuaded that what He had promised “He was able also to performⁱ.” In such hope there is no alloy of doubt or disquietude; since it is not built on precarious conjecture or on fallacious authority, but on the highest

^f Hebr. xi. 6.

^g Hebr. vi. 19.

^h Hebr. x. 23.

ⁱ Rom. iv. 21.

moral certainty that can be attained, even that which is derived from the veracity of God himself.

The several characteristics of Christian *charity* the Apostle has explicitly detailed in the chapter before us. The term itself is evidently used in its most enlarged and comprehensive sense, to denote that love to God and man which leads us practically to exemplify our faith and hope by works of glory to God, and beneficence to our fellow-creatures. It is the proper fruit of faith. Faith without it is dead, barren, and unprofitable; not a lively faith, not the genuine faith of a Christian. Hope without it degenerates into presumptuous folly. Yet charity itself cannot subsist without these to uphold and strengthen it; and is only called the greatest of the three, because it is the completion and perfection of the other two.

In the preceding chapter, the Apostle had treated largely of the extraordinary spiritual gifts then bestowed upon Christian teachers, for the more extensive diffusion of the Gospel. There were “diversities of gifts, diversities of administration, diversities of operation.” To one was given “the word of wisdom;” to another, “the word of knowledge;” to another, “faith;” to another,

“the gifts of healing;” to another, “the working of miracles;” to another, “prophecy;” to another, “discerning of spirits;” to another, “divers kinds of tongues;” to another, “the interpretation of tongues^k.” The value of these special and extraordinary endowments the Apostle duly appreciates. But lest the possessors of them should be inclined to vaunt themselves upon such distinctions, he reminds them that all these “manifestations of the Spirit” were given “to profit withal^l.” They were given, not for the purpose of exalting certain individuals above their fellow-members in the church, but for the common good. If, therefore, any man presumed upon his acceptance with God by virtue of these endowments only, or if he selfishly withheld the benefit of them from others, the Apostle gives him to understand that he possessed them in vain. “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ.” And “whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it^m.” Accordingly the Apostle,

^k 1 Cor. xii. 4—10.
12, 26.

^l 1 Cor. xii. 7.

^m 1 Cor. xii.

though he exhorts them to “covet earnestly “the best gifts,” adds expressly, “yet shew I “unto you *a more excellent way*”.” That “more excellent way” he explains in the chapter before us. It is the way of applying every spiritual gift to a beneficial purpose. It is that predominant sentiment of “love” to God and man, which leads us to reduce our *faith* to *practice*, and to impart to *others* the *hope* we ourselves enjoy.

In this consists the preeminence of charity above faith and hope. Charity is “the “*end* of the commandment;” the point to which faith itself tends, and by which we are known to be sincere in our professions as Christian believers. The *miraculous* gifts of the Spirit (which St. Paul appears constantly to bear in mind in this comparison) were bestowed sometimes upon one, sometimes upon another, according to the exigencies of the case, and at the sovereign will and pleasure of Him from whom they proceeded. But they conveyed no real benefit to the possessors, unless they were rendered instrumental to the glory of God and the welfare of mankind. “Though I speak with the tongues “of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a

“ tinkling cymbal. And though I have the
 “ gift of prophecy, and understand all mys-
 “ teries, and all knowledge; and though I
 “ have all faith, so that I could remove moun-
 “ tains, and have not charity, I am nothing.”
 Nay, the Apostle excepts against even the
 most splendid acts of religious zeal or worldly
 munificence, if destitute of this inward prin-
 ciple of conduct. “ Though I bestow all my
 “ goods to feed the poor, and though I give
 “ my body to be burned, and have not cha-
 “ rity, it profiteth me nothing.” An ardent
 zeal, without due consideration of the pur-
 pose to be effected, may possibly induce some
 to encounter martyrdom in testimony of their
 faith. Others may be prompted by vain-glo-
 rious or even selfish motives to deeds of such
 munificence as will not fail to gain popular
 applause. But “ the Lord seeth not as man
 “ seeth; for man looketh only on the out-
 “ ward appearance, but the Lord looketh on
 “ the heart^o.” Out of the *heart* proceeds
 that which is really good or evil in the sight
 of God. Zeal must issue from the pure love
 of God; and beneficence from the genuine
 love of man, to render either of them meet
 to ascend up as a “ memorial before God^p.”

This is still further evident from the spe-

^o 1 Sam. xvi. 7.

^p Acts x. 4.

cific qualities which St. Paul ascribes to this most excellent gift of charity;—qualities, expressive rather of the inward disposition than of the outward act. “Charity suffereth
 “long, and is kind; charity envieth not;
 “charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed
 “up—seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in
 “iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth
 “all things, endureth all things.” The appeal is here made to the hearts and consciences of men, not to their professions and practices only, in proof that this first of Christian virtues has a real ascendancy over them.

To these its preeminent qualities the Apostle adds another token of its excellence; “Charity never faileth.” In this it excels even the highest of those spiritual gifts which accompanied the first preaching of the Gospel. For, “whether there be *prophecies*, they shall
 “fail; whether there be *tongues*, they shall
 “cease; whether there be *knowledge*, it shall
 “vanish away.” Such extraordinary endowments were bestowed for special and occasional purposes only; and, those purposes being answered, they were gradually withdrawn. But charity, “the very bond of peace, and of

“all virtues,” was to be a permanent characteristic of every faithful disciple of Christ. By this, Christians of every age and country were to be united, as pursuing the same object, guided by the same principles, animated with the same hopes, servants of the same Lord, heirs of the same privileges, and co-operating in the same great design, that of extending and perpetuating these blessings to the whole race of mankind.

In a still higher sense also, “charity never faileth.” Faith operates only in our present state of existence. “Now we know in part.” “Now we see through a glass darkly.” But “when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.” This St. Paul illustrates by an apt similitude. “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” The knowledge of a child bears scarcely any proportion to that of a person advanced to maturity of understanding. So that which the wisest of men can now attain to falls infinitely short of the knowledge promised to us in a future state. Then shall we see “face to face;”—then shall we “know even as we are known.” Faith will necessarily cease when vision takes place,

when we become actual partakers of “the glory that shall be revealed in us^q.” Hope likewise will then terminate;—“for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for^r?” There will no longer be hope, when we are put in possession of our heavenly inheritance. These therefore sustain us only in our earthly pilgrimage, and prepare us for the state of bliss that is to follow. Charity does more than this. It not only accompanies us to the end of our journey, and “fills us with all joy and peace in believing^s;” but it enters with us into our final rest. It abideth for ever. Love to God, and love to those whom God hath created, redeemed, and sanctified, are not only the purest and most exalted of our enjoyments here on earth, but will be the duty and the happiness of the blessed in heaven, throughout all eternity. Charity, then, is the “greatest of these,” because it gives perfection to the others; because it is more diffusive in its operation, more durable in its continuance; and because it renders us more like to God Himself; for “God is love,” and “he that loveth not knoweth not God^t.” So truly was it said, by an ancient Father of the

^q Rom. viii. 18.

^r Rom. viii. 24.

^s Rom. xv. 13.

^t 1 John iv. 8.

Church, that “faith is the beginning of the
“Christian life, and charity the end of it^v.”

How pernicious, then, is the error of those who in any way separate these from each other! Yet we meet with some who seem to rest upon the all-sufficiency of *faith*, and to despise the works of charity; to be puffed up with a conceit of superior knowledge in Divine truths, or a presumptuous reliance on the Divine favour; and who, in consequence of these overweening pretensions, introduce a party-spirit into matters of religion, and create strife, dissension, and schism in the Church. Others, again, appear to cherish a delusive *hope*, with little either of faith or charity; nominally professing themselves Christians, yet indifferent as to the articles of their Creed or the conduct which their Christian profession requires of them;—their hope being unsupported by Scripture or reason, and scarcely distinguishable from infidelity itself. Nor is the number inconsiderable of those who lay claim to *charity*, without regard to religious principle; who vilify “modes of faith,” and magnify moral worth; who seem to regard the hope of the Gospel as a matter of but secondary consideration; easily satisfied with their own imaginary notions of goodness, or

^v Ignatius in Epist. ad Ephes.

with the applause of the undiscerning multitude; not considering that even the most specious of our “good works” will not be found acceptable in the sight of God, unless they spring from a principle of faith in the Divine promises and obedience to the Divine will, without which, charity itself, as combining the love of God with the love of man, can hardly be said to exist. It is difficult to say which of these imperfect schemes is most at variance with the general tenor of the Christian dispensation. All claims to a saving faith without charity, the Apostle declares to be nothing worth. All foundations of hope which have not the promises of God for their support, are by the same authority shewn to be illusory and vain; since “other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ^w.” In like manner, all pretences to charity, without the obedience of faith, and the hope that is in Christ Jesus, will be unable to abide that scrutiny which every man’s work must hereafter undergo at the tribunal of our heavenly Judge; for, says the same Apostle, “love is the fulfilling of the law^x.” Faith, hope, and charity then are essential requisites in the Christian character. They are also peculiar to that character, and

^w 1 Cor. iii. 11.

^x Rom. xiii. 10.

when happily united and cooperative, they will ensure to the possessor of them (through the merits and mediation of HIM, for whose sake alone our best services can be accepted) the reward of eternal life.

And now, what has the *unbeliever* to put in competition with these inestimable gifts, or what can he substitute in their stead? Acknowledging no guide but his own fallible reason, no Saviour to atone for his failings or transgressions, no sanctifier to correct his evil propensities, or to aid his imperfect endeavours, his faith is but self-confidence, his hope but doubt and darkness, his charity little better than an animal instinct, which may as often lead him wrong as right, or a sordid selfish feeling, prompting him to seek the good of others with no other motive than as it may subserve his own personal interests.

On the other hand, what has the *enthusiast* to offer, which, in his zeal to renounce all self-righteousness, can supersede the necessity of bringing these Christian graces into united operation? He boasts perhaps of his faith, and of something more than hope, of *absolute election*, of *indefectible grace*, of an *experimental assurance* of his salvation. But unless his faith “work by love^y,” and be “shewn by his

^y Gal. v. 6.

“works^z,” unless his hope be that which “maketh not ashamed,” diffusing a salutary influence over his whole life and conversation; what will his boast avail? What will it avail, to plead the promises of the Gospel, without adhering to its stipulations and conditions?

Let it, then, be our first care to “examine “ourselves, whether we be in the faith^a;”—whether we be firmly rooted and grounded in those fundamental articles of our belief, the tendency of which is to influence every part of our conduct, to give a right direction to every thought and purpose of the mind, to pervade every inclination and affection of the heart. Having laid this sure foundation of what is good and acceptable in the sight of God, let us constantly set before us that blessed hope, which is the immediate result of such a firm conviction, and affords the most powerful of all encouragements to perseverance unto the end. Thus fortified and supported, let us “go on unto perfection^b,” by cultivating that charity which springs from “a pure heart and a good conscience,” as well as from “faith unfeigned.” Let this be manifested in the diligent performance of whatever belongs to our Christian profession; in that regulation of the temper, the appe-

^z James ii. 18.

^a 2 Cor. iii. 15.

^b Hebr. vi. 1.

tites, the passions, the affections of our nature, which will shew that we are really “led
“ by the Spirit of God^c,” and are solicitous to
“ adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in
“ all things^d.” So shall we not fail, through
the mercies of God in Christ Jesus, to obtain
“ the end of our faith, even the salvation of
“ our souls^e.”

^c Rom. viii. 14.

^d Titus ii. 10.

^e 1 Pet. i. 9.

S E R M O N XVIII.

MATTHEW xi. 30.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

IT is hardly possible to reflect upon the certainty that we are hereafter to be called to give account of our present conduct, without being continually anxious to assure ourselves that we are in a state of safety, with respect to the judgment we must then undergo. Whether we look to the promises or to the threatenings of the Gospel, whether we contemplate our own insufficiency and imperfection or the infinite perfections of the Almighty, solicitude on such a subject is unavoidable, whenever we suffer these considerations to make their due impression upon our minds.

It is the desire to set the mind at ease upon this subject, that has probably led persons of different tempers and dispositions to form various and sometimes contradictory opinions respecting the measure and extent of

their Christian duty ; that some, through excessive dread of falling short of what is required of them, represent Christianity as a harsh and rigorous service ; whilst others would fain persuade themselves that it requires nothing of considerable difficulty, nothing that calls for strenuous exertion or for restraint upon their natural inclinations. Thus may extremes be produced, destructive either of that sober and tranquil state of mind which is intended for our present comfort and support, or of that caution and vigilance which are necessary in every stage of our progress to preserve us from falling.

Christianity itself, however, ought not to be made responsible for these inconsistencies : and it is of importance to vindicate it against any misrepresentations, intentional or unintentional, to which it may thus be rendered liable. For as the one of these extremes tends to encourage men in a careless and libertine practice, so the other affords to unbelievers, and to the thoughtless part of mankind, a pretence for rendering it odious or contemptible in the general estimation. Whereas the Gospel itself gives countenance to neither of these parties. It is not so lax and accommodating in its nature, as to adapt itself to our corrupt inclinations ; nor is it so irre-

concilable with those affections and desires which belong to us as human beings, as to be justly deemed an unreasonable service.

To this view of the subject we are led by our Lord's declaration in the text. Having adverted to the obstinacy and impenitency of certain cities in Judæa, where his doctrine had been rejected notwithstanding the mighty works he had performed, he invites his hearers in the following affectionate and impressive terms:—"Come unto me, all ye that labour
"and are heavy laden, and I will give you
"rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn
"of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart;
"and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For
"my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Here it is to be observed, that our Lord appears to speak of *His* yoke and burden as distinguished from some *other* yoke and burden to which his hearers were already subject. The persons whom he then addressed being principally Jews, the expressions may undoubtedly be understood to intimate, that the Gospel was intended to release them from the yoke of the Mosaic Law, and to substitute less burdensome ordinances for their observance. But they are capable also of a more extended application; an application which will include all who may be said to "labour,"

and to be “heavy laden ;” that is, all who feel the burden of their sins, all who are conscious of their infirmities, all who, though desirous faithfully to discharge their duty to God and man, are convinced how impossible it is to deliver themselves from that bondage of corruption under which every man labours during his continuance in this earthly state. They who are duly sensible of this their condition may be said to seek “rest unto their souls ;” and that rest they are assured of finding by sincerely embracing the terms of the Gospel. To all such, therefore, whether Jews or Gentiles, our Lord declares, that “his yoke is “easy, and his burden is light.”

If, then, there be any who, upon a review of the system of salvation revealed to us in the Gospel, esteem it to be a yoke that is *not* easy, and a burden that is *not* light, we may presume it is because they have not yet sufficiently reflected upon the weight of that burden from which it offers to release them ;—because they do not consider what it is to labour under a weight of trespasses and sins without the hope of a Redeemer, to struggle against infirmity and corruption without help from above, to fight against their spiritual enemies without armour or weapons powerful enough to resist their attacks. Were this

thoroughly felt and understood, the terms on which these advantages are proposed would appear comparatively light and easy.

The first step, therefore, towards enabling us to form a right judgment of the Christian religion in this respect, is to draw a just comparison between the condition in which it places us, and that from which it delivers us. For as an offender who is restored by the clemency of his sovereign from darkness and captivity to light and freedom, will not be forward to complain of any practicable service which he is called upon to render to his benefactor; so the faithful Christian, who reflects upon the state from which he is delivered by his Lord and Saviour, will not be disposed to think hardly of the service that he is enjoined to perform. A sense of gratitude will prevent him from considering the commandments laid upon him as grievous, notwithstanding those restraints or difficulties to which they will unquestionably subject him.

But we shall be far from doing full justice to the subject, if we examine it only in this point of view. Christianity may challenge a thorough investigation of its whole practical system, not only to shew how pure and perfect it is in all its parts, but also to prove how entirely it is adapted to our present wants

and necessities, and how conducive to our best and most substantial enjoyments.

It is true, indeed, that the duty it enjoins will always be felt by corrupt nature as in some sense a yoke and a burden. It lays restraints upon our propensities to evil; it checks our unreasonable desires; it calls for the exercise of active piety and virtue. But if it were not in this sense a yoke and a burden, it would be prejudicial to us, and destructive of real happiness. Instead of giving “rest to our souls,” that repose of mind, that serenity and satisfaction, which alone can enable us to enjoy whatever is worth possessing in this life, it would leave us exposed to turbulence and disquietude, which must ever arise from uncontrolled appetites and undisciplined affections. This will more distinctly appear when we rightly understand what kind of yoke or burden the Gospel really lays upon us.

The practical part of religion is usually divided into two great branches, called *positive* and *moral* duties;—the former relating to external acts of worship, enjoined for special purposes of intercourse between man and his Maker, and deriving their whole virtue and efficacy from the positive declaration of God’s will; the latter including the entire

circle of those duties which result from the natural and necessary relations in which men are placed towards God and towards each other, and from the obligations incumbent upon all rational creatures to fulfil the purpose of their being. These, whether the knowledge of them be derived immediately from Revelation, or from human laws and institutions, or from any innate perception of right and wrong, are denominated *moral* duties, and are confessedly of universal obligation.

With respect to the former class of duties, relating to acts of external worship, the Christian religion presents in point of simplicity and ease a striking contrast to every other. The *Jewish* ritual, however admirably adapted to its particular purpose, that of preserving a chosen race, a peculiar people, from intercommunity of worship with a corrupt and idolatrous world, was nevertheless felt and acknowledged to be in many respects extremely burdensome; insomuch that St. Peter describes it to be “a yoke which “neither they nor their fathers were able to “bear^a.” The multiform religions of the *heathen* world consisted of little else than ceremonial institutions; and those, not only

^a Acts xv. 10.

burdensome to the deluded worshipper, but oftentimes cruel and licentious. Christianity, on the other hand, enjoins no ordinances but such as are pure, simple, easy of performance, expressive in signification, and conveying both important instruction and important benefit. Its sabbaths, its sacraments, its sacrifices of prayer and praise, speak for themselves, as to their design and their utility. When undebaſed by the vain inventions of men, (which have in ſome inſtances unhappily been engrafted upon them,) they tend to the nobleſt elevation of mind, as well as to the purification of the heart.

But it is needleſs to enlarge upon this part of our ſubject; ſince, however negligent many may be of duties of ſuch a deſcription, none, perhaps, will deliberately charge the Goſpel with impoſing in that reſpect a grievous yoke or heavy burden. *Other* diſparagements muſt be ſought for, *other* pretences reſorted to, if it be intended to exhibit Chriſtianity as detrimental to our preſent eaſe and comfort.

Were we indeed to take our eſtimate of the practical part of the Chriſtian religion from the representations either of its moſt aſtere or its moſt light and thoughtleſs profeſſors, we might greatly err. If men

will misinterpret *some* particular precepts of the Gospel, from not regarding *others* which are designed to limit their meaning and extent; if, through prejudice or misconception, they draw a harsh and discouraging picture of Christian duty; this will not alter the real state of the case. “To the law and to the testimony^b” we appeal for a more righteous judgment. The fanatic may exhibit as genuine Christianity some distorted images of his own conception; and the scoffer will delight to re-echo what he advances, for the purpose of bringing our religion into disrepute. The careless Christian may think he has found a smooth and flowery path to heaven; and the libertine will doubtless thank him for the discovery, and ask in triumph, where is the difference between the Christian moralist and himself?—But let the Gospel be its own interpreter. Whatever is revealed is sufficiently plain to all who will examine it with candour and singleness of heart, and will never fail to plead its cause successfully with a sound and unprejudiced understanding.

What then are the grounds of complaint with respect to the practical duties of Christianity?

^b Isaiah viii. 20.

Christianity requires us to become “new creatures^c,” different altogether from the children of this world. It lays certain restraints upon our natural appetites and inclinations, requiring self-denial as a necessary duty, and itself compares the difficulty of this, to “cutting off a right hand,” or “plucking out an eye^d.” It charges us “not to be conformed to this world^e ;”—it exacts vigilance and circumspection with respect to the infinite variety of temptations that beset us. It teaches us continually to “watch and pray, “that we enter not into temptation^f.”—It prescribes regulations for the thoughts and affections, as well as for the actions of mankind.—It enjoins humility, forgiveness of injuries, and a willingness to suffer for righteousness’ sake ; and that we should submit to all this without repining or dissatisfaction.

Let us briefly examine these injunctions, and see whether they afford any reasonable ground of complaint.

Admit, then, that the Gospel requires we should become “new creatures,” and contrasts “the children of light” with “the children of this world,” as beings of an opposite character and description. But is not

^c 2 Cor. v. 17. Gal. vi. 15.

^d Matth. v. 29, 30.

^e Rom. xii. 2.

^f Matth. xxvi. 41.

the reason of this sufficiently evident? He who embraces the Christian faith has new objects, new views, presented to him. The believer and the unbeliever have each of them distinct pursuits, as to the main end of their exertions. They place their “chief good” in different attainments. The one is confined to the present life only; the other extends his concern to the life to come. So far every one may perceive an essential difference between the faithful Christian, and the unbeliever or the hypocrite. But this, instead of rendering the service of the Christian a so much greater hardship, or disqualifying him for the duties and enjoyments of his present state, will prove to be the very circumstance which lessens his difficulties, and adds to his strength and ability to overcome them.

Observe, for instance, the effect of this principle in the restraint of our natural appetites and inclinations. Does it exact, as the superstitious devotee imagines, perpetual seclusion and abstinence, or abstraction from the concerns of the body? Does it insist upon an entire renunciation of those enjoyments which the providence of God hath placed within our reach? On the contrary, are we not enjoined to receive these with thankfulness as the gifts of his overflowing

bounty? It is simply a “denial of ungodliness and worldly lusts,” a renunciation of that which poisons the very source of enjoyment. Of what rational gratification, then, is the Christian hereby debarred? Are his social feelings blunted? Is he prohibited from the exercise of any faculty, either of mind or body, which can minister to his own welfare or the good of those around him? What bounds are prescribed by the Gospel injunctions to any of his pursuits or pleasures, which observation and experience do not prove to be most conducive to the real use and the satisfactory enjoyment of them? Painful sacrifices may indeed sometimes be required. For the mind, as well as the body, may be brought into so morbid a state, may be so affected by inveterate evil habits, that recovery cannot be hoped for without resolutely submitting to privations and to restraints irksome to an undisciplined mind. But is this to be laid to the charge of Christianity, as an abridgement of our happiness? When a limb, or an organ of sense, is become so diseased as to endanger the whole body, do we accuse the surgeon of severity for stating the necessity of amputation or excision? Or when fever rages in the veins, is the physician reproached for prescribing abstinence and unpalatable re-

medies? Even so it is with our spiritual frame. Sin is the disease of the soul. It is continually operating, more or less, to our injury and danger; and when suffered to have its unrestrained course, it will gain such an ascendancy as to threaten total destruction. Whatever, therefore, may be the evil habit, it must be parted with, lest destruction should ensue. This the Gospel accordingly enjoins. But be it observed, it operates also as a preventive of these evils. It prescribes that regimen of the heart and the affections, which no less certainly tends to the preservation of the soul's health, than wholesome food and exercise, with temperance and moderation, conduce to that of the body. All its restraints upon the animal faculties have this for their object, and plainly indicate the merciful and benevolent purpose of him who requires this service at our hands.

To the same effect are those injunctions which respect our compliance with the maxims and practices of the world. "Love not the world," says St. John, "neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him^s." These are strong expressions; but they must be interpreted in conjunction with

^s 1 John ii. 15.

other passages of Scripture. Now St. Paul characterizes the faithful Christian to be one who so uses the world as “not abusing it^h :” and the Scriptures abound with instructions which shew that it is not required of us to disregard worldly concerns, nor morosely to refuse a participation in its innocent enjoyments. Still there are special reasons why we should not “love the world,” with the love due to higher objects. This world is not our home ; it is full of dangers, and often tempts us to evil. “The lust of the flesh, “and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of “lifeⁱ,” are the worldly things of which the Apostle admonishes us to beware : and he assigns as a general reason why we should not set our affections upon these things, that “the “world passeth away, and the lust thereof ; “but he that doeth the will of God abideth “for ever^k.” Therefore, the love for it which is here prohibited is simply that which would draw us off from reflecting upon the concerns of another world ; that which would so rivet our inclinations to this earthly abode, as to make us regardless of our spiritual interests. And the prohibition is to be understood as only exhorting us, in other words, “so to pass

^h 1 Cor. vii. 31.ⁱ 1 John ii. 16.^k 1 John ii. 17.

“through things temporal, that we finally
“lose not the things eternal.”

It were easy to pursue this inquiry further, and to shew, in like manner, that whatever may be said respecting the vigilance and circumspection required of the Christian, the necessity of resisting temptations, the control over the very thoughts of the heart, the duties of self-abasement, forgiveness of injuries, and humble resignation to the will of God; do in effect enjoin nothing more than that which every considerate man will perceive to be necessary for the attainment even of present ease and tranquillity; and, consequently, that no hardship can be alleged respecting the rule of Christian duty in these respects, which will not apply to every system that is founded on correct views of human nature.

But even this is not the full statement of our case. The Christian religion is not only equally reasonable with other systems in every duty that it exacts; but it goes far beyond every other in the helps which it provides for the performance of those duties, and in its means of recovery from sin and error. This is the peculiar boast of the Gospel dispensation; this it more especially is, which

makes its burden light, and its yoke to sit easy on every one who bears it.

The more perfect any system of duty is, the more impracticable would it be, if we were left entirely to ourselves. But we are taught, that “our sufficiency is of God^k ;” that He will “give his Holy Spirit to them “that ask him^l ;” and that we shall “not be “tempted above that we are able to bear^m .” Thus, though the Gospel does not give a greater latitude than other systems ; though it does not authorize a relaxation of duty, or encourage us in evil of any kind ; yet, to him who steadfastly believes its promises, it gives that confidence which actually enables him to act up to such a profession—an advantage which no system of human legislation ever did or ever can supply.

It is also peculiar to the Gospel, that it leaves room for repentance ; that it invites us to it and assures us of its efficacy, through the all-sufficient merits of our Redeemer. If this hope were not afforded, the very perfection of the Christian law would indeed render it most formidable to every humble-minded disciple. If, whenever a temptation prevailed, we were irrecoverably lost ; if, whenever a tittle of the Law had been violated, our

^k 2 Cor. iii. 5.

^l Luke xi. 13.

^m 1 Cor. x. 13.

condition became desperate ; who might abide the rigour of the dispensation ? But to redeem us from this state was the very purpose for which the Son of God was manifested in the flesh. “ If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous ; and he is the propitiation for our sinsⁿ. ” This, indeed, is the supreme excellence of the “ wisdom which is from above^o ; ” that, without abating in any respect the authority or perfection of the law of righteousness, it makes such provision for the transgressor as may enable him, if he be not incorrigibly perverse, to retrieve his error and escape condemnation : while at the same time such is the nature of the provision made for his recovery, as to exhibit in the strongest possible light the heinousness of his transgression, and incite him to obedience by every motive of love and gratitude.

Thus did our Lord verify the declaration, that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. If that restraint sits easiest upon us, which is best adapted to our present nature and condition ; if that obedience is least irksome, which springs from affection as well as from duty, and flowing spontaneously from the heart, makes the “ service ” itself to be “ per-

ⁿ 1 John ii. 1, 2.

^o James iii. 17.

“fect freedom ;” then is nothing wanting to convince us that the Gospel is indeed, not only “a faithful saying,” but “worthy of all “acceptation^p.”

Shall we, then, forfeit these advantages by vainly endeavouring to find a smoother and easier way to eternal life? Shall we charge the Author of this dispensation of grace and mercy, with imposing upon us a burden too grievous to be borne, or abridging us of any real happiness which it is in our power to obtain? Shall we, as if we were born for misery and not for happiness, sullenly reject the good that is within our reach, and strive to make this world, both to ourselves and others, a scene of sadness and dejection?

The steadfast and sober-minded Christian will beware of all these errors. Thankful to God for the revelation of his will, and “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus^q,” he will shew his thankfulness by a hearty and uniform obedience to its laws. He will leave it to the unbelieving and irreligious to decry our religion as a harsh and gloomy system; well-knowing that they who reject its commandments as grievous, and refuse to bear the light burden and easy yoke of Christ, must bear the burden of sin, the slavery of

^p 1 Tim. i. 15.

^q Rom. iii. 24.

passion, the galling yoke of turbulent appetites and affections. He will therefore persevere in the path he hath chosen, and “go on his way rejoicing.” Cheerful and unaffected piety will be the fruit of this perseverance. And never will religion appear so attractive, never will it be so powerful to “turn many to righteousness^r,” as when they who act under its influence thus testify to the world that their obedience is free, and willing, and cheerful; that they delight to “follow after the thing which is good;” that they deem it no hardship to comply with whatever it requires; but derive their best enjoyments and their purest satisfaction from living “as becometh persons professing godliness^s,” and who “know what is the hope of their Christian calling^t.”

^r Dan. xii. 3. ^s 1 Tim. ii. 10. ^t Ephes. i. 18.



SERMON XIX.

1 CORINTHIANS vii. 24.

Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God.

IT is of great importance, both for the confirmation of our faith and the improvement of our practice, that the proper influence of Christianity upon the social concerns of mankind should be well understood. To represent it as utterly at variance with our temporal interests, is to weaken its hold upon our affections, and to excite a prejudice against it not easily to be overcome. The tendency of such a persuasion is to make men either libertines or fanatics; inducing them either to cling to “the world, and the things that are in the world,” to the exclusion of “the one thing needful;” or to neglect their duties to mankind, and desert the station in which the providence of God hath placed them.

Against mistakes of this description the

Apostle's admonition in the text is evidently directed.

It appears, that among the Corinthian converts were certain perverse or misjudging persons, who sought to take advantage of what they deemed their Christian liberty, in dissolving the ties of civil and domestic life. The husband who was married to a wife not yet converted to the faith, and the servant whose master was still a heathen, imagined that they might break off these relationships, and contract others less detrimental to their Christian calling. The Apostle pointedly censures these proceedings. He enjoins every one to continue in the same state of life wherein he had been before his conversion; and urges, that in every condition, the main thing to be regarded was "the keeping of the commandments of God." Christianity, he states, gave no new privileges in this respect. Whatever their worldly calling might be, and whatever were its duties, CHRIST was their Master, who with His own blood had paid the price of their redemption; and to Him they were accountable for the discharge of those duties. Instead of making their Christian profession a pretence for neglecting these, they were to perform them upon the great Christian principle of obedience to the Divine

will: “ Brethren, let every man, wherein he “ is called, therein abide with God :” let him continue to be an orderly and useful member of the community, yet acting under an habitual impression of his responsibility to the Almighty for his general conduct.

In this injunction two positions are clearly implied ;—first, that all men have, or ought to have, their particular callings or occupations in society, with the respective duties attached to them ;—secondly, that they are to discharge these duties upon a *religious* principle ;—they are to “ abide in them *with God.*”

The necessity of being occupied in some particular course of worldly employment is evidently derived from the ordinance of our great Creator. It results from the very constitution of our nature, and from our connection with every thing around us ; which render personal exertion of some kind, bodily or mental, necessary to the well-being of every individual. Even in the state of paradise, occupation was found for man : and had he continued in that state, much of his happiness would probably have arisen from the increased variety of his duties as his sphere of social life became more extended. After his fall, the necessity of laborious and even

painful exertion was indeed laid upon him, as the consequence of his transgression. But even in this penal sentence there was a proof that the Almighty “in his wrath remember-
“eth mercy^a.” In its result, the execution of this sentence is productive of health, strength, cheerfulness, and many substantial enjoyments unknown to those who refuse to take their share in fulfilling this part of the Divine will. The wise sayings of Solomon abound with illustrations of the misery of slothfulness and the blessings of industry. Daily experience confirms these representations, and teaches more effectually than words can do, how vainly man attempts to reverse this ordinance of his Maker. God “openeth
“his hand, and filleth all things living with
“plenteousness^b.” But while the hand of God is bountiful to give, the hand of man must be diligent to receive.

This diligence is no less necessary for the good of others, than it is for our own. “No
“man,” says the Apostle, “liveth unto him-
“self^c.” His kindred, his friends, his country, all have claims upon his exertions. To withhold from any of these the benefit of his active services is to withhold from them their

^a Habak. iii. 2. ^b Psalm. cxlv. 16. ^c Rom. xiv. 7.

due. Every man has a kind of right as well as interest, in the labours of each individual of the community. For as in the body of the man, so is it in the body of the state; there is no member, be his station what it may, who has it not in his power to render himself profitable to his fellow-members, by discharging the functions of his proper office.

Nor is the spiritual well-being of mankind less connected with the discharge of these duties than their temporal welfare. Man's fallen and corrupt state makes such employment necessary for the good of his soul as well as of his body. "Idleness," says the wise son of Sirach, "teacheth much evil^d." It engenders strife, voluptuousness, pride, envy, fretfulness, ill-will. Hence it was the advice of an ancient Father of the Church, "Be always doing something good, that the Tempter may never find thee at leisure:" and doubtless this is one of the best securities against the many temptations which continually beset us.

Occupation, then, useful and proper occupation, is necessary to all. The highest are not exempt from it as a matter of duty: the

^d Eccclus. xxxiii. 27.

lowest are not of so little importance to the community that they can neglect it without injury to others, as well as to themselves. Every individual fills a certain space in society, is stationed at a certain post, to which some duties are annexed, and where his influence must so far be felt, that good or evil will be the effect of his conduct; and the eye might as well say to the hand, I have no need of thee; or the head to the feet, I have no need of you; as any member of society pretend that there are no calls upon him for taking his share in the concerns of the social body.

But, secondly, the Apostle enjoins that we should not only abide in our callings, but abide in them “WITH GOD.”

It is presumed that every one to whom this admonition is addressed, whatever be his worldly calling, acknowledges himself to have embraced one of an infinitely higher and more important kind, “the calling that is in “Christ Jesus;” and that he knows it to be his bounden duty so to demean himself in his character of a man of the world, as to shew withal that he is a CHRISTIAN. Nor will it be difficult to prove that religion may be so associated with the secular concerns of

life, as to promote rather than obstruct a man's usefulness in his worldly occupations, and greatly to enhance his value as a member of society.

The Scriptures instruct us, that "godliness
" is profitable for all things, having the pro-
" mise of the life that now is, as well as of
" that which is to come ;"—that " all things
" work together for good to them that love
" God ;"—that if we " seek first the kingdom
" of God and His righteousness, all these
" things" (the necessary things of the present
life) " shall be added unto us ;"—that " the
" eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and
" His ears are open unto their prayers ;"—
that " the blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich,
" and he addeth no sorrow with it ;"—that
" the just man walketh in his integrity, and
" his children are blessed after him^f." Such
assurances as these the scorner may despise
and ridicule. But the Christian, knowing
" in WHOM he has believed," and that " HE is
" faithful who hath promised," will continu-
ally bear them in mind ;—his heart will
" stand fast in the Lord ;" and the conse-
quence will be such firmness of purpose, and
such internal confidence, as will best prepare

^f 1 Tim. iv. 8. Rom. viii. 28. Matth. vi. 33. Psalm
xxxiv. 15. Prov. x. 22. Prov. xx. 7.

him for every concern that demands his attention.

This desirable frame of mind will also be greatly strengthened by considering, on the other hand, the scriptural denunciations against those who disregard the Divine counsels and precepts. The fearful declarations, that “the desire of the wicked shall perish;”—that they shall “eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices;”—that “the prosperity of fools shall destroy them;”—that “his own iniquities shall take the wicked himself;”—that “the steps of his strength shall be straitened, and his own counsel shall cast him down^g;”—these warnings will not only deter the believer from similar practices, but will repress any emotions of envy or fretfulness on observing the occasional success of irreligious men. They will teach him to hold still in the Lord, and abide patiently upon Him, and not to grieve at him whose ways may prosper by doing after evil counsels^h.

But the main support and encouragement of the faithful Christian, respecting every thing which here concerns him, is the lively hope of “an inheritance incorruptible and

^g Ps. cxii. 10. Prov. i. 31, 32. Prov. v. 22. Job xviii. 7.

^h Psalm xxxvii. 7.

“ undefiled, and that fadeth not away.” This enables him to form a just estimate of the value and the proper use of this present life. The man who looks at this world only is perpetually falling into grievous mistakes or ridiculous follies, in his expectations of what it is to afford him. He hunts after happiness, and never attains it. He chases one bubble after another, and his labours end in vanity and vexation of spirit. One scheme is baffled; another is started; disappointment still ensues: the spirit is fretted, irritated, soured; or at best is “ careful and troubled about many things,” not having sought the “ one thing needful,” not having “ chosen that good part which cannot be taken awayⁱ.” This is the consequence of false theories of human happiness; of seeking in *this* life what is reserved for the *next*; of expecting here the possession of that which at present can only be enjoyed by anticipation, through faith in Him who hath promised it as our final reward in a future state. The considerate Christian is far less liable to these disappointments. His expectations of earthly good are less sanguine. His affections being set upon higher objects, he lifts up his heart to God; and regarding himself as only “ a

ⁱ Luke x. 41, 42.

“stranger and a sojourner upon earth,” he is thankful to the Author and Giver of all good things for every degree of comfort now afforded him.

Hence arises another preeminent advantage in the transaction of every concern of life; that of having the mind unembarrassed by embittering reflections, unperplexed by internal doubts and disquietudes. The want of a religious principle creates a necessity for devices of various kinds to supply its place; for concealment, for subterfuges, for plausibilities, for contrivances to make a show of what in substance and reality is wanting: all which must necessarily increase the perplexities and multiply the difficulties of business beyond calculation. From these embarrassments the man of Christian integrity is free. He is free also from harrassing apprehensions of the consequences of his actions, and can safely rely on the Psalmist's golden rule, “Commit thy way unto the Lord, and He shall bring it to pass^k.”

This state of mind, however, can only be attained by him who has laid a solid foundation for reliance upon the Divine favour. And here it is that the power of the Christian religion most sensibly operates. The Gos-

^k Psalm xxxvii. 5.

pel not only teaches man the way wherein he should go, but provides for his return to it, when he has unhappily deviated into sin and error. The mind, though for a while disquieted and troubled, can look to the Redeemer, as a “strong hold whereunto it may “always resort;” unless the heart be absolutely hardened against the awakening calls of grace and mercy. At the same time, this very dispensation of grace and mercy imposes a tenfold obligation on the believer to “make his ways and his doings good¹.” The price paid for his redemption speaks in stronger terms than any human authority can suggest, the necessity of “perfecting holiness in the fear of God^m.” When this principle has once taken full possession of the heart, its effect will be manifested in the whole conduct towards God and man; in acts of social worship, in the diffusion of religious knowledge, in fidelity and integrity, in benevolence and kindness, in moderation, forbearance, courtesy, and all the lesser duties of life. “Whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there

¹ Jerem. xviii. 12.

^m 2 Cor. vii. 1.

“be any praiseⁿ,” it will prompt men to “think on those things,” and to do them.

If, then, the blessing of God upon our own endeavours; if esteem, reputation, and honour among men; if firmness, consistency of principle, and tranquillity of mind, be the most probable means of conducting our worldly concerns to a prosperous issue; it requires no further argument to prove that he who “abides in his calling with God,” he who acquits himself of its several duties and occupations as being accountable to God for the discharge of them, lays the surest foundation of his own personal welfare, while he confers upon others the most substantial benefits by an example which can hardly fail to win their affections as well as their approbation, and prevail with them to emulate so bright a pattern.

For our encouragement in this respect the Scriptures abound in precepts which can only be fulfilled in active and social life. They abound also in commendations of persons who were occupied in stations demanding a constant intercourse with mankind, and amidst a continual pressure of worldly business. They make honourable mention of princes, nobles, statesmen, legislators, soldiers,

ⁿ Phil. iv. 8.

mariners, traffickers of various descriptions ; nor is any intimation given that these occupations were an hinderance to their spiritual progress. It was an observation also of a most exemplary prelate of our own Church^o, whose life was eminently distinguished by habits of piety and devotion, that “in order to
“ dispose our hearts to devotion, the active
“ life is to be preferred to the contemplative,” and that “to be doing good to mankind dis-
“ poses the soul most powerfully to devo-
“ tion.”—“We are surrounded,” says he, “with motives to piety and devotion, if we
“ would but mind them. The poor are de-
“ signed to excite our liberality ;—the miser-
“ able, our pity ;—the sick, our assistance ;—
“ the ignorant, our instruction ;—those that
“ are fallen, our helping hand. In those that
“ are vain, we see the vanity of this world ;
“ in those that are wicked, our own frailty.
“ When we see good men rewarded, it con-
“ firms our hope ; and when evil men are
“ punished, it excites us to fear.”—These are the lessons which that excellent prelate learned, and which we may all learn from our intercourse with the world, provided we carry into it the same sense of religious duty, to enable us to turn them to so good account.

o Bishop Wilson.

It is indeed no less gratifying than instructive, to know that examples have never been wanting to verify these remarks;—to know that men of all ranks and professions have distinguished themselves by blending religious principle with an unremitting and successful application to their secular concerns; nay, that they have hence obtained so much the larger share of public esteem, so much the brighter meed of honour and reputation among men, in addition to the approval of their own hearts. These are invaluable testimonies to the beneficial influence of pure religion upon the general interests of society. And (blessed be God!) they are not confined to times past. Many honourable and splendid instances of the same kind are still presented to our observation; insomuch that not an occupation or profession among us can be named, in which there are not very many individuals distinguished by skill and ability, and by assiduity in the discharge of their professional duties, who at the same time “adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour in all things,” and are so much the more generally beloved and revered.

Nor can I here forbear to notice how forcibly this injunction applies to those who belong to the highly important profession,

for the study of which this Honourable Society is set apart. No pursuits appear to be more congenial to each other than those of religion and jurisprudence. The laws of our own country in particular, are founded on the basis of the Christian religion; its doctrines and duties being recognised in all our courts of justice, and interwoven with every part of our legislative code. The practitioner in this profession has, moreover, opportunities which the members of no other profession, perhaps, can enjoy to an equal extent, of observing the human heart in all its varieties; of tracing its windings and obliquities; and of comparing it with the standard of rectitude and truth. When a deep-rooted principle of religion comes in aid of these opportunities, the advantage must be incalculably great, and its influence cannot but be extended far and wide.

An admirable instance of this is upon record, in the life of a very distinguished luminary of the law^p, the pride and ornament of this society; of whom one of his biographers, most intimately acquainted with him, has said, “He that considers the active
“part of his life, and with what unwearied

^p Sir Matthew Hale.

“ diligence and application of mind, he de-
“ spatched all men’s business which came
“ under his care, will wonder how he could
“ find any time for contemplation: he that
“ considers again the various studies he passed
“ through, and the many collections and ob-
“ servations he hath made, may as justly
“ wonder how he could find any time for
“ action.”—Concerning the value of religion
in its influence upon men’s secular pursuits
and occupations, this great man thus forcibly
expresses his sentiments.—“ Take a man that
“ is employed as a statesman or politician,
“ though he have much wisdom and prudence,
“ it commonly degenerates into craft, and cun-
“ ning, and pitiful shuffling, without the fear
“ of God: but mingle the fear of Almighty
“ God with that kind of wisdom, it renders
“ it noble, and generous, and stayed, and
“ honest, and stable. Again, take a man that
“ is much acquainted with the subtiler kind of
“ learning, as philosophy for instance, without
“ the fear of God upon his heart, it will carry
“ him over to pride, arrogance, self-conceit,
“ curiosity, presumption: but mingle it with
“ the fear of God, it will ennoble that know-
“ ledge, carry it up to the honour and glory
“ of that God that is the Author of nature, to
“ the admiration of His power, wisdom, and

“ goodness : it will keep him humble, modest,
 “ sober, and yet rather with an advance than
 “ detriment to his knowledge. Take a man
 “ industrious in his calling, without the fear
 “ of God with it, he becomes a drudge to
 “ worldly ends, vexed when disappointed,
 “ overjoyed in success : mingle but the fear
 “ of God, it will not abate his industry, but
 “ sweeten it : if he prosper, he is thankful to
 “ God that gives him power to get wealth ; if
 “ he miscarry, he is patient under the will
 “ and dispensation of the God he fears : it
 “ turns the very employment of his calling
 “ into a kind of religious duty and exercise of
 “ his religion, without damage or detriment
 “ to it.”

It would but weaken the impression of such noble sentiments as these, were I to pursue the subject farther. The application of them to his own case every man must make for himself. Every man has some calling or occupation in society (for his station, be it what it may, is, or ought to be, his occupation) in which he must “ abide with God.” Every calling has also its peculiar advantages and disadvantages ; its opportunities of doing good, and its temptations to evil. To “ abide in it with God,” implies a diligent endeavour to act with reference to both these ; and thus

to sanctify, as it were, our worldly pursuits to His honour and service. This cannot be done without habitual attention to religious duties; especially those means of grace, by which we are to obtain help from above, to enable us to fulfil the will of God. Nevertheless, we are in effect discharging a very considerable part of our duty towards God, by performing our duties towards man, in obedience to His command; and we are acting as faithful disciples of CHRIST, when we do good to one another for Christ's sake.

Thus may we make our spiritual calling and election sure, without any neglect of our temporal callings; and having "used this world as not abusing it^q," may confidently trust, that we are so passing through things temporal, as finally to lose not the things eternal. "Our fruit will be unto holiness, and "the end everlasting life^r."

^q 1 Cor. vii. 31.

^r Rom. vi. 22.

SERMON XX.

2 TIMOTHY iii. 4.

Lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God

ST. PAUL, in giving instructions to Timothy for the government of the Church at Ephesus, states without reserve the difficulties to be encountered in the arduous station to which he had been appointed. A great portion of these would arise from the opposition made to the preachers of Christianity, not only by those who disbelieved and derided its doctrines, but by those also who “held the “truth in unrighteousness^a,” by those who “had the form of godliness, but denied the “power thereof^b,” by all who, whether they believed or not, were so wedded to their evil lusts and affections, that, rather than conform to the pure precepts of the Gospel, they would revile and persecute those who taught it in sincerity and truth. These evils, the Apostle states, would be characteristic of those “last “days,” when the Jewish dispensation had ex-

^a Rom. i. 18.

^b 2 Tim. iii. 5.

pired, when heathenism was receiving its mortal wound, and when those who had hitherto felt at ease in their corrupt principles and practices would ill bear to be awakened out of their lethargy, or called upon to “set their affections on things above,” and to “make their ways and their doings good.” Timothy was nevertheless to learn himself, and to teach others, to “fight the good fight of faith,” and to “lay hold on eternal life^c.” He was to “watch in all things, to endure afflictions, to do the work of an Evangelist, to make full proof of his ministry^d ;” notwithstanding these discouragements, these impediments to his progress.

Among the characters whom the Apostle describes as most injurious to Christianity, and rendering those times “perilous” to its preachers, we find specified in the words of the text such as were “lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.” This character, though commonly reputed to be comparatively inoffensive, seems to be here classed among offenders of the most heinous description: and although we need not hence infer that the love of pleasure is in itself an offence of equal magnitude and enormity with many here enumerated by the Apostle,

^c 1 Tim. vi. 12.

^d 2 Tim. iv. 5.

yet is it evidently spoken of as at variance with the spirit of the Gospel, and consequently to be carefully guarded against by every one who would walk worthy of his Christian calling. At the same time it is necessary, both for our own peace of mind and for the vindication of the Gospel itself from injurious misrepresentations, that we should rightly apprehend in what the offence really consists, against which we are thus awfully admonished.

This inquiry is the more requisite, since there is an evident propensity in most men, even among those who are religiously disposed, to make their duty as light and easy as possible, and to complain if it interfere with their pursuit either of any worldly interest or gratification. Hence arise many grievous mistakes respecting the proper influence of Christianity upon the concerns of the present life, and many incongruous representations of its character, its purpose, and its practical effect. On the one hand, it is portrayed as a system of austerity and unsocial gloom; on the other, as holding out promises and expectations little dependent upon our ordinary deportment in society.

The influence which religion ought to have upon our intercourse with the world, so far as

relates to the necessary *business* and *occupations* of social life, has been already considered in a former Discourse on St. Paul's exhortation, "Let every man wherein he is called, therein abide with God;" implying that Christianity does not require us to abandon our worldly callings, but to regulate them by religious principle. I purpose now to examine the Apostle's admonition in the text respecting the *love of pleasure* as contrasted with the love of God; with a view to obviate errors either of laxity or of rigour, which an erroneous apprehension of the subject might lead us to entertain.

Pleasure, in itself, is no where expressly forbidden in the word of God. Of religion it is said, "her ways are ways of pleasantness^c;" an expression denoting its cheerful tendency, and its influence in promoting even our present enjoyments. Neither do the Scriptures condemn a rational and moderate participation of those delights which the boundless variety of external objects presents to our view, and for the enjoyment of which our benevolent Creator hath implanted within us desires and faculties capable of deriving from them a high degree both of animal and of intellectual gratification. With respect to

^c Prov. iii. 17.

these, Solomon reminds us, that a man may “rejoice and do good in his life,” and may “enjoy the good of all his labour,” it being “the gift of God^f.” Had it been otherwise, we can hardly conceive that the Almighty would have promised to his chosen people Israel abundance of temporal prosperity as the reward of their obedience, or have threatened the want of it in chastisement of their disobedience: that he would have encouraged them, on the one hand, with the assurance of being “blessed in the city and in the field, in “the fruit of their bodies and the fruit of “their grounds, the increase of their kine “and the flocks of their sheep, in their basket “and in their store;” or have denounced, on the other hand, curses in all these things, if they refused to “hearken to the Lord their “God, and to do his commandments^g.” Nor can we suppose that if a renunciation of such enjoyments were essential to the Christian character, our Lord himself would have forborne that austerity of conduct which obtained so great veneration for his forerunner John the Baptist;—that he would have countenanced the festivities of the marriage-feast, have partaken of entertainments provided for him, or have reproved the censorious

^f Eccles. iii. 12, 13.

^g Deut. xxviii. 3, 4, 5, 15, &c.

Pharisees who affected a higher degree of sanctity than others, by adopting rigid and unsocial manners. There is no ground, therefore, from Scripture, or from the genuine character of the Christian religion, for an *indiscriminate* prohibition of pleasure. Our affections, doubtless, are not to be unduly set upon any thing that this world affords; but the pleasure arising from a temperate enjoyment of it is not in itself reprehensible. It has indeed been very justly remarked, that our Lord was cautious not to give his religion “a disgusting appearance; not expecting in any man a deadness to human society and human enjoyments; not exacting austerities which God has not commanded; not laying a great stress on indifferent or frivolous observances, which serve only to burden and disquiet men; but for the most part leaving to general rules and to private discretion the total and partial, the stated and occasional abstinence from lawful gratifications of our natural appetites^h.”

Nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance to consider what latitude a Christian may take in these respects: and this involves two distinct points of inquiry;—first, what kind of pleasure is to be deemed allowable;—se-

^h Archbishop Newcome, On our Lord's Conduct.

condly, what degree even of such pleasure as is allowable may safely be indulged.

No one can be ignorant that many indulgences passing under the denomination of pleasure are totally forbidden by the laws of God. “Let us,” says St. Paul, “walk honestly, as in the day, not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envyingⁱ.” These are emphatically called “works of darkness,” utterly irreconcilable with the light of the Gospel: and for such the Apostle admits of no apology or extenuation. “Let no man,” says he, “deceive you with vain words; for ‘these things’ sake cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience^k.”—and, “of these I tell you now, as I have told you also in times past, that they who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God^l.” On this first point, therefore, there seems little room for error on either side, where men are content to abide by the simple dictates of Christian truth. Yet, while too many professed Christians undoubtedly give themselves, in these respects, far greater latitude than the word of God will warrant; admitting into the number of their habitual pursuits or recreations prac-

ⁱ Rom. xiii. 13.

^k Ephes. v. 6.

^l Gal. v. 21.

tices so nearly bordering on these offences, or so directly tending towards them, as to be under no circumstances safe or harmless ;—others there are who err in the opposite extreme ; not only excluding offences expressly or virtually prohibited by the Divine laws, or customs leading to such offences ; but branding almost every personal or social amusement as profane or sinful, unless it have some religious purpose immediately in view. Thus libertinism on the one hand, and puritanism on the other, have done much towards bringing that religion, which when rightly applied is the highest perfection both of liberty and purity, into disesteem. Yet to avoid the extremes of pharisaical strictness and licentious indulgence, no great skill in casuistry seems to be requisite. The true medium will be obtained by a careful observance of those simple maxims of St. Paul, “ Let not your good be evil spoken of ^m ;” and, “ happy is he who condemneth not himself “ in that thing which he alloweth ⁿ .”

The second point proposed for our inquiry, in what degree even allowable pleasures may be indulged, requires more attentive consideration ; because here it is that we are most prone to abuse our Christian liberty.

^m Rom. xiv. 16.

ⁿ Rom. xiv. 22.

St. Paul's expression in the text implies that we are bound to moderate our inclinations for pleasure of every kind, however innocent or desirable. If we be lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, it matters little of what nature the pleasure may be. Pleasures in themselves sinful give a more direct and deadly wound to the conscience: but pleasures in themselves lawful will, if not duly limited and controlled, lull the soul into carelessness and insensibility, and eventually work its destruction. The former openly assails the religious principle; the latter secretly undermines it. Those of the one kind beguile their votaries with the appearance of harmless intention; those of the other prevail with them to encounter unblushingly disgrace and infamy.

When the love of any kind of pleasure is carried to excess, it becomes hostile both to religion and to benevolence, to the love of God and the love of man. Selfishness is generally one of its characteristics; impatience of control is another. Those who entirely devote themselves to the pursuit of it are usually regardless of reproof or advice, however tenderly or affectionately given. Charity, humility, filial respect, reverence for God's word and sanctuary,—how often are

these set at nought, where the heart and mind are surrendered to this fascinating spell! Not that these odious consequences are perhaps either intended or foreseen by the deluded parties; but that there is a sort of intoxicating quality in the ingredients of which the cup is composed, that deprives both the moral and the intellectual powers of their natural energy, and lays them prostrate at the footstool of appetite and passion.

To prevent the love of pleasure from gaining this fatal ascendancy, it is necessary thoroughly to understand its character, and how it may be reduced to a state of subjection compatible with our happiness or our safety.

To what end, then, and for what purposes hath God permitted us to partake of any of the various enjoyments of this present state? Are they not evidently intended to relieve the toils and assuage the troubles of life? to refresh the mind and recruit the body? to heighten our sense of the Divine goodness? to minister occasion for thanks and praise to the Author and Giver of all good? to render us more cheerful and contented in the discharge of our respective duties? Are we not bound, then, to take good heed that our plea-

sures really contribute to these purposes; that they strengthen and refresh the body, not enfeeble and impair it; that they afford ease and solace to the mind, not disturb and perplex its operations; that they render us more susceptible of the pure satisfaction arising from the practice of religion, not incapacitate or indispose us for attention to its duties? “Every one,” says the Apostle, “that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things^o.” The Christian knows that he cannot hope to attain the prize that is set before him, unless the inferior propensities of his nature be kept in due subjection to the superior, and every faculty of body and mind be preserved in the state of discipline fitted to its appropriate functions. Else why were these faculties bestowed upon him by his Creator?

Even the Epicurean philosophy, which made pleasure the chief good of man, admitted the necessity of certain restrictions and reservations, for the attainment of its own sordid end. The voluptuary was to pursue his object with a discriminating judgment. An inferior present gratification was sometimes to be sacrificed to the prospect of

^o 1 Cor. ix. 25.

a future object superior in value ; or a lesser pain was occasionally to be endured to avoid a greater. And to connect the system, in appearance at least, with moral virtue, prudence was inculcated as the great rule of life ;—prudence, however, which should be subservient to pleasure, by such restraints only as might prevent pleasure from becoming destructive of itself. Here then even the most wretched system of philosophy that ever was promulgated—the system which had regard only to the sensual enjoyments of man, without respect to his higher faculties ; and which set at nought the fear of a Supreme Being and the expectation of a future state—was compelled to pay homage to a principle which pure religion inculcates from far higher motives, and with infinitely more powerful sanctions. It was reluctantly obliged to confess, that he who loves pleasure more than duty misses the object at which he aims ; that this boasted chief good of man has within it the seeds of evil ; that it cannot accomplish its own purpose, but in subordination to some nobler rule of conduct.

The sterner discipline of the Stoic and Academic schools trained indeed their pupils to notions more worthy of the intellectual and moral dignity of man. They inculcated a

contempt of that love of pleasure which is the sole object and occupation of the weak and frivolous, but the recreation only of the wise and considerate. They deemed it wholly unworthy of the human character to pursue this as its chief good, or to suffer it to obtain such an ascendancy as to cloud the understanding, enfeeble the mental energies, and destroy their relish for superior enjoyments. And whatever extravagancies they might engraft upon these truths, or however in avoiding one extreme they might fall into another not without its perils; yet is it cheering, amidst all the doubt and perplexity that darkened their disquisitions, to find them so resolutely asserting and vindicating views of the character and duties of man, which raise him above mere animal existence, and teach him to aspire to some higher good than is attainable under the dominion of sense and appetite.

With these speculations, however, we have little concern, except as they serve to shew how contemptibly the votary of pleasure must always reason and act, when he yields implicitly to its domineering influence. Revelation speaks in a higher tone than the gravest or profoundest philosophy can assume; and when she says to the voluptuary, "Touch not,

“taste not, handle not^p,” she has considerations to offer which none of the greatest masters of the heathen schools could have at their command.

The full purpose of man’s present state of being, the full extent of duty laid upon him, and the full measure of happiness to which he may aspire, can be known only through the medium of revealed religion. Through that medium are disclosed to us truths respecting all these points, undiscoverable by the light of nature ; truths otherwise so little known or thought of, that by the acceptance of them we enter, as it were, upon a new state of being, with new hopes and expectations, and new desires and inclinations corresponding with those expectations ; for “where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also^q.” If the views and prospects which Christianity sets before us have taken thorough possession of our minds, no inferior interests will appear worthy to hold a divided empire in our affections.

That an inordinate love of pleasure is utterly incompatible with these elevated expectations, and is fatal to the growth of the dispositions which such expectations should lead

^p Col. ii. 21.

^q Matth. vi. 21.

us to cherish and improve, is too manifest to be called in question. St. Paul's strong expression, "She that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth^r," will not appear overcharged, if we consider the effect of a life devoted to self-indulgence. The victim of such delusion, while in his own estimation he is enjoying life in its fullest extent, becomes utterly insensible to his concerns as a being destined to live through all eternity. He forgets that "this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality^s." He lives only as a creature of the moment, born yesterday, and to-morrow to return to his kindred earth, there to be forgotten like the beasts that perish. Whoever reflects upon this tendency of the unbounded pursuit of pleasure to disqualify us for the great work we have to do preparatory to our departure for that state in which we are to live for ever, will see the necessity of regarding this subject, not merely as theorists, speculatively determining how far we may lawfully indulge this or that inclination, or to what possible extent we may gratify it with impunity; but practically, as frail and fallible creatures, beset with temptations and prone

^r 1 Tim. v. 6.

^s 1 Cor. xv. 53.

to yield to them ; whose duty, therefore, it is to habituate ourselves to forbearance and restraint even in our most harmless enjoyments. In this sense, “happy is the man that feareth “ alway^t ;”—happy is he who would rather forego any portion of lawful gratification, than put his conscience to hazard by approaching the utmost boundary of what he deems to be his Christian liberty.

Upon maxims and rules of conduct so indisputable as these it might be thought superfluous to dilate, did we not daily witness the deplorable consequences resulting from their neglect. Even as to the kind of gratifications generally deemed admissible in society, how many absolutely sinful and prohibited pursuits are allowed and encouraged under the denomination of pleasure ! How many offences against God and man, how many direct or indirect violations of both tables of the Law are undisguisedly practised in the career of miscalled gayety ! The open profanation of God’s name and of his sabbath, the shedding of man’s blood as a sacrifice to arbitrary notions of honour, the breach of the marriage vow, the exercise of subtle ingenuity in circumventing others, and the most malignant endeavours to despoil them of their

^t Prov. xxviii. 14.

reputation ;—how many of these, comprising violations of no less than six out of the ten commandments, are admitted daily and hourly into circles of pastime and amusement, as if conventionally agreed upon among the declared votaries of pleasure, to pass current without restraint or reprehension ! Thus under the very name of pleasure may sin destroy her thousands and her ten thousands, who see not the net that is spread for them, until so far entangled as to be unable to escape.

Among those also who may be more vigilant, or more scrupulous, as to the kind of pleasure they admit, how rare is the prudence that errs not in excess ! When the pleasure harmless in itself, and intended to promote health and cheerfulness, refreshment and ease, benevolence and mutual affection, becomes the occasion of anxiety and bodily indisposition, of fatigue and irritation, of dissatisfaction and discord ;—when it interferes with the discharge of important duties, public or private ;—when, above all, it precludes due attention to the great work of spiritual improvement ;—then may it truly be said, that “ the thing which should have been for our “ wealth becomes the occasion of falling^v.” Then is verified the prophet’s denunciation,

^v Psalm lxix. 23.

“ Woe unto them that call evil good, and
“ good evil ; that put darkness for light, and
“ light for darkness ; that put bitter for sweet,
“ and sweet for bitter^w.” Then pleasure it-
self is turned to sin ; and the abuse of that
liberty and of those gifts which God hath be-
stowed upon us for our solace and support, is
rendered instrumental to our severest punish-
ment.

But how shall the simple and well-inten-
tioned guard themselves in these respects ?—
By a criterion which even the most simple
may apprehend, and which the well-inten-
tioned cannot but acknowledge to give all the
latitude which Christian liberty will sanction.
Honestly and carefully let them examine what
influence the love and the fear of God really
have upon their minds. If such be the con-
tinual occupation and the restless agitation
in which the pursuit of pleasure engages us,
as to preclude either time or inclination for
reflecting on those momentous truths which
never can be matters of indifference to a sin-
cere Christian, nor absent even for a single day
from his thoughts ; we may be assured that
whatever we profess, or however innocently
we imagine ourselves to be employed, we
are as yet “ far from the kingdom of God.”

^w Isaiah v. 20.

Still further are we from it, if we delight in gratifications which, either expressly, or by necessary inference, are prohibited in the word of God. Every such indulgence renders us chargeable with positive sin ; and though the world may scoff at our apprehensions, or endeavour to delude us by its countenance and encouragement, yet let us remember that the world can neither do away the offence nor avert its punishment. If, on the other hand, in our intercourse with society, and in our participation of its various modes and customs, its diversity of recreations and lighter pursuits, calculated rather to enliven and embellish social life than to render it substantially beneficial and improving, we so far keep clear of its corruptions as not to conform to any maxims or practices in opposition to the known rule of Christian conduct ;—if we allow no pleasure by that rule forbidden, nor suffer pleasure of any kind, forbidden or not forbidden, to gain the ascendancy over us ;—then need we not disquiet ourselves with distressing and painful scruples ; with fears grounded on our falling short of unattainable perfection ; or with vain and presumptuous attempts to render ourselves more acceptable to God, by habits incompatible with our condition as men. Thus, under the control of

well-disciplined affections, and of that circumspection which the habitual fear and love of God will never fail to generate, we may take to ourselves the good that is before us, with thankful and cheerful hearts. We may “taste” and see how gracious the Lord is^x,” not only in the *spiritual* blessings which claim our first and chief acknowledgments, but even in those *temporal* enjoyments which the plenitude of his never-failing loving-kindness hath abundantly provided, to cheer us on our earthly pilgrimage. And in so doing, we shall but emulate the examples of those in whom pure and genuine religion assumes the most attractive aspect ; whose prudence degenerates not into formality, whose blameless sanctity of life is not rendered repulsive by austerity or moroseness, whose abstinence from prohibited or excessive indulgence is not the mere result of constitutional temperament or assumed apathy ; but who have learned the art of self-government from the instructions of heavenly wisdom ; and who impart to all around them a portion of the tranquillity and equanimity, the holy and virtuous “joy” that no man taketh from them^y.”

To strengthen us, however, for those conflicts with temptation, from which the most vigi-

^x Psalm xxxiv. 8.

^y John xvi. 22.

lant can never expect to be entirely exempt, let our constant supplications be offered up to Him who alone can enable us to withstand the enemies of our salvation. “Our sufficiency is of God^z.” From Him only cometh strength, and wisdom, and discernment, to guide us through the perils of our spiritual warfare. And since we are taught that even His grace may be quenched, may be grieved, may be rendered of none effect, by those who are regardless of its influence and think lightly of its dictates; it behoves us diligently and impartially to try and examine ourselves as to the progress we are making towards Christian perfection, and as to the grounds and principles on which we build our hopes as heirs of immortality. Ever let it be remembered, that “here we have no continuing city;” and that we are to partake of whatever enjoyments are placed within our reach, as passengers only through this transitory scene.

That we may never swerve, however, from our line of duty in these respects, there are two events for which it will behove us to live in a constant state of preparation;—the day of adversity, and the day of judgment. It is folly to banish the thought of either. Evils there are in this present life, of which

^z 2 Cor. iii. 5.

we must expect to have our portion; and though this expectation need not embitter the enjoyment of present good, or excite a querulous anticipation of future evil; yet ought it to abate that excessive love of pleasure, which will only increase the weight of adversity when it comes upon us, and render us less able to bear its pressure. Still greater folly is it to repel from our thoughts the expectation of future judgment. This, indeed, is an event which every Christian knows to be inevitable. And what other restraint upon his evil propensities can be more effective? What stronger motive can be set before him, so to regulate all his enjoyments here, that they may not terminate in endless bitterness and woe hereafter? What warning can be more awakening, more urgent, more imperative than this, to restrain us all from falling under the fearful condemnation of being “lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God?”

S E R M O N X X I .

JOHN xii. 43.

*For they loved the praise of men more than the
praise of God.*

AMONG the hard sayings which render the Gospel difficult of acceptance to worldly-minded men, are those which seem to discourage the desire of popular admiration. It is spoken of here by the Evangelist in reproach of some of the Jewish rulers, that “they loved the
“praise of men more than the praise of God;” and the instance given of their conduct in this respect is stated in the preceding verse, that though they “believed” on our Lord, yet “because of the Pharisees they did not
“*confess* him :” thus sacrificing their own convictions to a corrupt desire of obtaining favour from a powerful and overbearing sect. It is, indeed, mentioned of the Pharisees themselves, that they were of a similar disposition, making an outward show of sanctity

and strictness, that they might be “seen of men^a,” and “have their reward” in the veneration with which they were regarded by the multitude. Their almsgivings, their fastings, their prayers, their rigid observance of the ceremonial law, and of the numberless traditions engrafted upon it, originated, for the most part, in this desire of public estimation. Nothing could be more contrary to the spirit by which the disciples of Christ were required to regulate their conduct. A blessing was pronounced upon dispositions the most opposite to these. They were even to “rejoice” when “hated, reviled, or persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” because “great should be their reward in heaven.” The duties of prayer, and almsgiving, and fasting, were to be practised from the desire of serving and pleasing God, not for gaining the admiration of men; and the appetite for indiscriminate condemnation was thus pointedly reproved;—“Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you^b!”

There can be no doubt that these and many similar admonitions had especial reference to the difficulties under which the primitive Christians laboured. So hostile were the laws and usages, the sentiments and dispositions,

^a Matth. xxiii. 5.

^b Luke vi. 26.

of both Jews and Gentiles at that period, to the genuine spirit of Christianity, that the faithful could hardly hope to escape the obloquy of those who refused to embrace this new religion. The recent convert would hence be continually in danger of “making shipwreck of his faith^c,” unless he could rise above popular opinion, and shew that he was actuated by a respect to that “recompense of reward” which he was taught to look for in a future state. Hard, therefore, as the condition might seem of disregarding the approbation of the multitude, its necessity could not be disputed; and none could doubt that if under such circumstances they sought the reward of having “all men speak well of them,” they must put to hazard that hope which their heavenly Master had set before them. But the primitive Christians were by no means exclusively concerned in these admonitions. Temptations similar, though not circumstantially the same, will at all times endanger the constancy of sincere believers in the Gospel; nor will it ever be a task unattended with difficulty, so far to subdue the desire of applause as not to “love the praise of men more than the praise of God.” The dispositions which most generally prevail to

^c 1 Tim. i. 10.

draw men aside from their spiritual concerns, are the love of the world, the love of pleasure, and the love of fame. Through the love of the world, its pomp, its wealth, its possessions, their thoughts become engrossed by secular business, sordid emoluments, or worthless distinctions. By the love of pleasure, they become wholly devoted to self-indulgence and sensual gratifications. By the love of fame, or popular applause, other passions, desires, and interests are called forth, no less dangerous in their tendency and destructive in their operation. To these the subject of our present Discourse more directly calls our attention.

Here, however, this preliminary observation is to be made, that, in the abstract, the love of praise is no more condemned in Scripture than the love of pleasure. The Jewish rulers were condemned because “they loved the “praise of men more than the praise of God;” as St. Paul censures those who were “lovers “of pleasure more than lovers of God.” In each case it was against the excessive love of either that the admonition was chiefly directed.

We have, indeed, abundant proof that our Lord and his Apostles regarded the love of honourable esteem and reputation among

men as a commendable feeling, and an useful incentive to laudable conduct. Our Lord says, “ Let your light so shine before men, “ that they may see your good works, and “ glorify your Father which is in heaven^d.” St. Paul speaks of public commendation as a motive and a recompense for well-doing:— “ Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? “ Do that which is good, and thou shalt have “ praise of the same^e.” He dwells largely upon the danger of giving offence to others by conduct which though not sinful in itself, might be liable to misconstruction; and he exhorts “ to provide for honest things, not only in “ the sight of the Lord, but in the sight of “ men^f.” To the Philippians he enjoins attention, not only to things “ true,” and “ just,” and “ pure,” but also to such as are “ honest, “ lovely, and of good report;” and he adds, “ if there be any virtue, and if there be any “ praise, think on these things^g.” It were easy to multiply quotations to the same effect. The value of a good name, the credit and honour that usually attend praiseworthy actions, the shame and disgrace of the conduct that renders men generally odious and abhorred: and even the posthumous reputa-

^d Matt. v. 16.

^f 2 Cor. viii. 21.

^e Rom. xiii. 3.

^g Phil. iv. 8.

tion which awaits the righteous, are occasionally urged as motives which ought to have an influence upon our lives and actions, subordinate only to that “fear of God” which is “the beginning of wisdom,” and of which only it can be said, that “the praise of it endureth for ever^h.” When we are commanded also to “honour all men,” “in honour preferring one another,” to “speak not evil of one of another,” and to be “courteous” in our general deportment; it is evidently supposed that we ourselves entertain a just sense of the value of such tokens of esteem from others, and of the injury we sustain in their being withholden from us. When we are taught, moreover, that among the punishments of the wicked in a future state, it will be one aggravation of their misery that they shall “awake to shame and everlasting contemptⁱ,” a direct appeal is made to those powerful feelings of our nature, by which the moral Governor of the universe clearly intended that we should be restrained from evil and stimulated to good.

Whatever admonitions, then, we meet with in holy writ tending to diminish the force of this sentiment within us, we are doubtless to understand as designed only to qualify and

^h Psalm cxi. 10.

ⁱ Dan. xii. 2.

restrict its operation, not to extirpate it from our affections. For as the fear of human ignominy and punishment may oftentimes operate with great effect to deter men from iniquity, though without the fear of God it can never be depended upon as a sure preventive of evil; so the encouragement arising from human approbation, however insufficient when not under the all-controlling principle of love and reverence for the Almighty, may nevertheless come powerfully in aid of that principle, and greatly strengthen the incitement to goodness. Nor can we doubt that these are to be regarded as jointly conducive to the attainment of Christian perfection, when we find it recorded as the eulogy even of our Lord himself, that as he “increased in wisdom and stature,” he increased also “in favour with God and man.”

Having thus guarded against misapprehension in our view of this side of the question, let us proceed to the more necessary cautions to be observed on the opposite side; lest we become liable to the censure passed upon those who “loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.” To act upon some clear and well-defined principles as to the limitation of that honour or praise we are allowed to receive or to seek from men, is among

the most indispensable requisites for preserving “a conscience void of offence.”

True it is, that the best men living cannot be altogether insensible to the value of reputation. To attempt to destroy this feeling would be to counteract one of the most powerful springs of human conduct, and might oftentimes operate as a fatal obstruction to the best enterprises that can be taken in hand. In many cases the success of these must, under Providence, mainly depend upon the estimation in which the persons are held by whom they are to be carried on. Supported by the weight and sanction of public opinion, they will be enabled to do much greater good, and to do it much more effectually. Labouring under the disadvantage of ill repute, the very same purpose and the very same measures may be viewed with an evil eye, and the most strenuous efforts rendered abortive. But what principle, what inclination is there, however innocent or commendable in itself, which may not become instrumental to evil? The love of praise and honour among men, which should lead to conduct deserving of their commendation, ceases to operate to that effect, when not con-

trolled by the higher and nobler desire of becoming acceptable in the sight of God. There is a morbid love of fame which prompts to the study of men's opinions, humours, and inclinations, nay, even of their follies and their vices, for the sole purpose of obtaining popularity. And this passes current among many, as an admirable proof of that knowledge of the world, which is too often considered as the only science worth cultivating, the most valuable of all acquisitions. To attain this, men have been taught systematically to practise the basest arts of flattery and dissimulation, to suppress (if they have any) their own religious principles or virtuous feelings, to minister to the corrupt passions and interests of others, and to exhibit a general pliancy of character, adapting itself to every person and to every circumstance which may forward the purpose they have in view.

Surely it may well be said that such "friendship of the world is enmity with God¹." Its pernicious influence upon religion and morals is manifest. It is the very reverse of what the Gospel inculcates. Instead of "love without dissimulation^m," it

¹ James iv. 4.

^m Rom. xii. 9.

teaches dissimulation without love. Instead of “the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and sincerity we have had our conversation in the worldⁿ,” it bids us seek our reward in the fruits of duplicity, and in a disregard of any well-grounded “confidence towards God.” Instead of the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove, it encourages the malignity of the former and the weakness of the latter. And for what is this fearful exchange of principle to be made?—To gratify an inordinate thirst for admiration and vain-glory, to become the theme of public conversation, to obtain distinction, and to be followed by a thoughtless multitude, unable or unwilling to discern between those to whom honour is really due, and those “whose glory is in their shame^o.” And even where no such systematic depravity of principle as this can be imputed, the propensity is yet very general, and the temptation very great, to suffer the opinion of the world to have an undue preponderance in our affections. Some are ambitious to lead the public sentiment; others implicitly follow it, too indolent or too careless to inquire whence it originates or whither it tends. Among these,

ⁿ 2 Cor. i. 12.

^o Phil. iii. 19.

steadfastness of principle and consistency of conduct must continually be sacrificed ; nor will the best talents, or even the purest intentions, be always sufficient to guard the integrity of him who looks to worldly admiration as the main recompense of his labours.

A great portion of the infidelity that prevails in Christian countries may be traced to this as its primary cause. Our Lord's exposition with the Jews, "How can ye believe, " who receive honour one of another, and " seek not the honour that cometh from God " only," implies how difficult it is, where this disposition has taken strong hold upon the mind, to give due weight to the evidences of religion, or fully to estimate its importance. The Gospel requires of us " not to be wise in " our own conceits ^p." One of its primary requisites is humility or self-abasement, than which nothing can be more opposite to the inclinations of those who are perpetually in quest of popular applause. Of how many also do we hear and read, who appear to have plunged into the depths of scepticism and libertinism, more from an ambition to display their wit, their learning, or their polemical

skill, than from the deliberate conviction of their own minds! How many, on the other hand, place themselves under the guidance of such instructors as these, captivated by the reputed brilliancy of their talents; and hoping to share with them some portion of their ill-earned fame! The same observations apply also to heresy, no less than to infidelity. Few of those, perhaps, who most distinguish themselves by singularities of religious opinion, or by pertinacious opposition to the established creeds and formularies of the Church, are not more or less under the influence of an overweening self-importance; a desire either of being thought superior to the multitude, or of drawing the multitude after them by the charm of novelty. Partly by “having men’s “persons in admiration^a,” partly by the hope of being had in admiration themselves, divisions and offences are at first readily begun, and afterwards are maintained through the increasing influence which they have upon the secular views and interests of those who uphold them.

In the lesser duties also of religion this influence is daily and hourly perceptible. When any error, vice, or folly, is prevalent among

^a Jude 16.

those with whom he associates, or is become more than usually in favour with the public, that man must be of more than ordinary strength of resolution who is not borne down by the stream. There is no question that the inward testimony of an unreproaching conscience, when once fairly and honestly obtained, is felt by almost every one to be of infinitely more value than any satisfaction to be derived from an extraneous source. But our social propensities, and the pleasure arising from pleasing others, form a powerful counterbalance to this impulse; and though the conflict may be sometimes painful, too frequently it will terminate in that which must render internal satisfaction unattainable. In either case, whether conscience approve what the world censures and ridicules, or the world extol and admire what conscience abhors, the votary of public admiration will be the victim of hesitation and inconstancy, halting between opposite opinions, yielding where he ought to resist, or resisting where it is his duty to obey.

Christianity, then, does not impose any harsh or unreasonable obligation, when it warns us not “to love the praise of men more than the praise of God,” or when it says, “Woe unto you when all men shall speak

“well of you.” The attempt to command universal approbation is laying snares in our path. It is tempting ourselves to become “partakers in other men’s sins.” It is blunting the edge of that virtuous sensibility, that quick and ready perception of right and wrong, which is bestowed upon us as our constant safeguard, and the effect of which is so forcibly implied in that admonition of the Apostle, “Abhor that which is evil, cleave to that which is good^r.” With this impression on our minds, there can be little difficulty in ascertaining the rule which is to direct our conduct in this respect. It is simply this:—let the commendation of the world be regarded as a secondary consideration only, subordinate to the favour of God. “Two things there are,” says an ancient Father of the Church^s, “whereof every man should be specially tender, his conscience and his reputation. Let conscience be his *first* care; let reputation be his *second* concern. Let him secure all within by being at peace with God and with himself; and then use what lawful means are in his power to uphold his character with the world.” The reverse of this cannot but be dangerous;

^r Rom. xii. 9.

^s St. Austin.

since “that which is highly esteemed amongst “men” may be “abomination in the sight “of God^t.” The Gospel, however, is far from requiring us to annihilate the desire of honourable esteem, or to overcome that sensibility to dishonour, which makes us shrink from merited reproach and contempt. On the contrary, it regulates both these useful and necessary feelings by the highest and noblest principle of human conduct, and thus secures them against misapplication. It gives no encouragement to affected singularity, or to intemperate zeal. All its injunctions have a tendency to conciliate the good-will of mankind; and every man who steadily conforms to them in his own practice, may reasonably hope to find that present reward of his labours, which St. John so happily describes in speaking of one of his fellow-disciples;—“Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself^v.”

It is true, indeed, that it may not always be in our power to attain to this twofold recompense of our honest endeavours. To secure ourselves absolutely against evil report is more than we are warranted in expecting. Accordingly the Apostle, when he enjoins us

^t Luke xvi. 15.

^v 3 John 12.

to “live peaceably with all men,” qualifies the injunction by saying, “if it be possible,” and “as much as in you lieth^w ;” implying that this must in a certain degree depend upon others, as well as upon ourselves. And when we are admonished to “provide things “honest in the sight of men,” or “things that “are of good report,” the same qualification is necessarily implied, as to the probable result. Yet much may unquestionably be done towards securing this happy result, by “eschewing evil and doing good^x,” by “walking circumspectly^y,” by “living soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world^z.” For praise is generally the reward of pure religion ; and one of the surest foundations of a good name is a truly Christian life. Let a man be conscientious and diligent in discharging the duties of his station ; let him demean himself becomingly to all, according to their respective characters and conditions ; let him be discreet in the use of his Christian liberty ; let him be “willing to communicate, “glad to distribute^a ;” let him be a lover of peace and concord, yet firm and resolute in “holding fast his integrity^b ;”—and his reputation among men will rarely fail of being

^w Rom. xii. 18.^x 1 Pet. iii. 11.^y Ephes. v. 15.^z Titus ii. 12.^a 1 Tim. vi. 18.^b Job ii. 3.

proportionate to his deserts. Yet should it be the will of God to suffer him, for the trial of his faith and patience, to fail of this present reward, he knows assuredly the joyful sentence he may hope for in that day, when, through the merits of the Redeemer, “every man,” whose name shall be found written in the book of life, “shall have praise of God^c.” The honour which is said to “come from God only,” is that which will have its consummation in a future state, and can only here be in part experienced, under a mixed dispensation of good and evil. “Glory, and honour, and immortality” in that state, are held out as motives to our advancement in Christian perfection. Our Lord himself, “for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame^d,” and we are taught to “consider HIM who endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest we be weary and faint in our minds^e.” The Apostles themselves, in imitation of their blessed Master, “thought their sufferings not worthy to be compared with the glory that should be revealed in them^f.” This was their powerful incitement to perseverance in well-doing, their hope and refuge under every

^c 1 Cor. iv. 5.

^e Hebr. xii. 3.

^d Hebr. xii. 2.

^f Rom. viii. 8.

trial and tribulation, which “filled them with
“all joy and peace in believing;” and enabled them to “abound in hope, through the
“power of the Holy Ghost^g.”

Yet, with reference still to that present recompense which a gracious Providence seems also to have intended should in some degree attend the good and virtuous, it behoves us to remind those whose stations or whose characters in society give them the greatest influence over public opinion, how awful a responsibility lies upon them to use that influence in the encouragement of what is really praiseworthy, and in the discountenance of those false notions of honour and dishonour which find too ready an acceptance in the world. When honour is a support to religion and virtue, and upholds the laws of God and of our country, then it confers benefits the most substantial on the whole community. “When it goeth well with the righteous, the
“city rejoiceth^h.” When honour is diverted into the opposite channel; when it is bestowed upon the worthless and unprincipled, men regardless of morals and religion; when it gives encouragement to false ambition, false glory, false patriotism, false notions of the public good; it then becomes the bane of so-

^g Rom. xv. 13.

^h Prov. xi. 10.

ciety, its plague, and its destruction. To avert these evils, the great and good, the wise and powerful, have one common interest, one common bond of public duty. So long as an honest fame has any charm to win the affections of men, so long will it be necessary to give that sentiment a bias to what is truly commendable. So long as unassuming worth and piety may be liable to droop and decay for want of seasonable support, it will be incumbent upon all who know how to appreciate such excellent qualities, to mark their reverence and affection by correspondent feelings. So long also as vice and irreligion are wont to present a shameless front, the brand of public censure and indignation, as well as the powerful arm of public justice, will be wanted, effectually to repress their inroads upon social life, and to prevent their contamination from spreading to the very vitals of the state.

In brief, the only ambition which as Christians we are warranted in cherishing, is that which seeks the esteem and praise of men, by approving our hearts and our ways unto God. To be “men-pleasers” only, is at all times hazardous, and often unsuccessful. To please God is an object of rational ambition, and which can never fail. It may humbly hope

for temporal rewards; it has the certainty of those which are eternal. If, then, there be any virtue, if there be any praise of this description, let our thoughts and endeavours be bent upon its attainment; that, by God's grace, we may go on from strength to strength, "provoking one another unto love" and good worksⁱ, and "perfecting holiness" in the fear of God^k."

ⁱ Hebr. x. 24.

^k 2 Cor. vii. 1.

SERMON XXII.

1 CORINTHIANS x. 23.

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient.

AGAINST extremes in matters of religion we cannot be too carefully guarded; excess of rigour and excess of laxity being almost equally prejudicial to truth, and equally destructive of Christian peace and charity. Upon preserving, therefore, that discreet deportment which abstains not only from evil, but from the appearance of evil, will greatly depend the perfection of the Christian character.

It is a maxim, indeed, indisputable, that “no man liveth unto himself^a.” This is evident from that state of mutual dependence in which our Creator hath seen fit to place us, as “members one of another;” and of which we have practical experience every day of our lives. Hence it follows, that in every action there are two points to be considered:

^a Rom. xiv. 7.

first, whether it may be done under any circumstances whatever; secondly, whether it may be done under those particular circumstances in which we are placed. These two points are clearly distinguished from each other in the words of the text:—"All things
" are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient." An inquiry into the occasion on which this distinction was made by the Apostle, will help to elucidate a very important rule of Christian conduct.

It appears, from the eighth chapter of this Epistle, that a question had been proposed to the Apostle respecting the liberty to be allowed to Christian converts, in partaking of the feasts which the heathen were accustomed to make upon the residue of what had been offered up in their idolatrous sacrifices. Many of the Gentile converts made no scruple in doing this; pleading, in excuse for the practice, that they did not intend any reverence to the heathen deities by eating of that which had been consecrated to idols; since they knew that an idol was nothing, and that what was consecrated to an idol did not thence acquire any real sanctity: but that they partook of these feasts, only as of common entertainments; not at all offending against their own consciences, nor swerving from

those principles of the religion they had embraced, which required them to hold idolatry in abhorrence.

To this plausible reasoning St. Paul replies at considerable length ; and resumes the subject in the present chapter. He admits, that if all had the same knowledge that they had, and could be brought to view the matter in the same light, the practice might be harmless. For to them who knew that an idol was nothing, and that the meats offered to idols had no more sanctity in them than other meats ; doubtless the partaking of such things would not *on their part* be an act of idolatrous service. “Howbeit,” says he, “there is not
“in every man that knowledge : for some,
“with conscience of the idol unto this hour,
“eat it as a thing offered to an idol ; and
“their conscience being weak is defiled.” Such persons might be led into idolatry by the example of those who assumed to themselves this latitude ; and therefore the Apostle adds, “Take heed lest by any means this liberty of
“yours become a stumbling-block to them
“that are weak.” He subjoins, however, in the present chapter, some observations to prevent a misapprehension of these instructions, as if he had hereby intended to proscribe all kind of social intercourse with their heathen

acquaintance. “Whatsoever is sold in the
“shambles, that eat, asking no question for
“conscience sake.” And, “if any of them
“that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye
“be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before
“you, eat, asking no question for conscience
“sake.—But if any man say unto you, This is
“offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not, for
“his sake that shewed it, and for conscience
“sake;—conscience, I say, not thine own, but
“of the other.”—Thus he admonishes them
to “give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor
“to the Gentiles, nor to the Church of God.”

The substance of these directions is comprised in the words of the text: “All things
“are lawful for me, but all things are not
“expedient:” or, as is added, in further illustration of the rule, “All things are lawful
“for me, but all things edify not. Let no
“man seek his own, but every man another’s
“wealth.” Nor is this to be considered as a
subtle distinction, adapted only to one particular case; but as an important maxim of Christian duty intended for general application; a rule of piety, prudence, and charity, the neglect of which brings with it evils of great magnitude, deeply affecting the interests of religion with respect both to ourselves and others.

There is a frequent conflict, perhaps, in the breast of every man, between the desire, on the one hand, to rid himself of some restraint upon his natural inclinations, and the dread, on the other hand, of incurring the penalties of transgression. Hence arises that anxiety we generally feel to ascertain the utmost latitude which conscience will allow, without convicting us of actual sin; and this latitude most men will be inclined to use to its utmost extent. Few can have examined their own hearts with impartiality, and not have discovered in themselves some such bias towards laxity of conduct; a bias, which more or less betrays itself in every occupation of life, and under every variety of trial and temptation. This also it is which prepares the mind to adopt many of those refinements in casuistry, by which the simplicity of truth is adulterated, and the ingenuousness of an unsophisticated understanding is too often easily beguiled. Habitual recourse to such refinements cannot but weaken the religious principle. Pure religion implies a devotedness of the heart and the affections to God; producing unreserved obedience to the Divine will, and earnest endeavours to attain to the greatest degree of perfection of which our nature is capable.

The attempt to curtail the measure of our duty strikes at the root of these affections. Instead of stimulating us to “go on unto “perfection^b,” it impedes our progress. It looks to the mere letter of the law, not to its spirit; and inclines us to be content with the “form of godliness,” with a meagre and spiritless observance of its outward rules, though destitute of “the power^c” of it; destitute of that inward vital sense of its importance which would make us solicitous to “perfect holiness in the fear of God^d.”

This is one evil of attempting to circumscribe our duty within the limits of what may be deemed abstractedly lawful, even so far as it may affect only our own spiritual improvement. Nor even with respect to ourselves only will the evil terminate here. We may be induced to incur great hazard on the score of transgressions, as well as omissions, of our duty. A dexterous casuist will soon become expert in so interpreting scriptural rules of conduct as very much to abate the rigour or the extent of their injunctions, when they seem to interfere with some favourite pursuit or gratification; and he who wholly disregards the expediency of what should be done or left undone, may

^b Hebr. vi. 7.

^c 2 Tim. iii. 5.

^d 2 Cor. vii. 1.

easily be persuaded to extend his liberty, even in things really lawful, far beyond the bounds which Christianity prescribes.

In various instances these effects are discernible. We see them in the inordinate pursuit of pleasure; in the habitual neglect of devotional exercises; in infringements upon the sanctity of the sabbath; and in the contempt of many personal restraints, which the circumspect Christian finds necessary for the due control of his appetites and passions. On such points it may be difficult to ascertain the exact boundary between what is strictly necessary and what is superfluous. The same indulgence that to one man is innocent, because he knows how to use it in moderation; to another may be injurious, because it ensnares him into excess. Greater self-denial may be requisite to some temperaments of mind and body than to others. Some are cold and sluggish in their affections; others ardent and vivacious; the one easily excited to enthusiastic fervours, the other difficult to be awakened to pious feelings. The same measure of devotional exercise may not, therefore, be applicable to both. Nor, perhaps, is any religious observance capable of being reduced to such definitive rules as will be alike ap-

plicable to all persons and in all situations, although the duty it involves be confessedly of universal obligation. In these, and in numberless other points, every one must be in some degree his own casuist; and every one will be liable to transgress or to fall short of his duty, who does not well consider what is expedient under all the circumstances of his particular case, as well as what is strictly within the letter of the precept. And though this may often be a matter on which he is amenable only to God and his conscience; yet is it essential to his religious character, and to his peace of mind, that he be not here a self-deceiver.

But whatever discretion in these respects a man is bound to exercise for the regulation of his own individual liberty, still further circumspection is necessary as it may affect the liberty of others.

No one can deny, that he who ventures to the extreme verge of what he deems to be lawful, sets an example which it may be extremely dangerous for others to follow, however confident he may be as to its effect upon himself. There is, therefore, great want of charity as well as prudence, in the notion too commonly entertained, that every man has a right to act for himself, regardless of the pro-

bable effect of his example upon those around him. Can a man be altogether innocent, who takes no pains to prevent any dangerous misconception of his own conduct? We are taught to pray that we may not be led into temptation ourselves. Is it not, then, our duty to take heed that others be not led into it by following in our steps? We are taught, not to be partakers of other men's sins. Is it not also incumbent upon us to beware lest we be the occasion of sin to other men, by setting them a pattern which they cannot safely follow?

Let us suppose, for example, that a parent, or a master of a family, conceives certain particular relaxations in the observance of the sabbath to be lawful, and that in his own case they may be innocently allowed; since he has well weighed them, not only in the abstract, but with reference to their probable effect upon himself; and is satisfied that he may admit them with impunity. But what if his children, his household, or his neighbours, unable or indisposed to discriminate as he does, should by adopting the same latitude forego the opportunity of that spiritual instruction which is necessary to them; or make the sabbath a day of listless indolence and profane amusement, instead of a day of

hallowed rest and devotional improvement? What, if not acting under the same impressions of conscious rectitude which he has done, they make his example a pretext for vicious indulgence, or even for entirely neglecting the care of their souls? Shall it be said that this is entirely their own fault; and that he is blameless who laid this stumbling-block in their way? May we not rather say, that in the sight of God and man he has incurred much of the responsibility implied in our Lord's awful admonition, "It must needs be that offences come: but woe unto that man by whom the offence cometh^c?"

How far a similar responsibility may attach to those who fearlessly encounter temptations and dangers which it requires more than ordinary strength to withstand, whether in the pursuit of pleasure, of gain, or of worldly distinction; is a question to be also well weighed according to the Apostle's maxim in the text. And the rule is in these cases of the more importance, because it is scarcely possible that a man can be engaged in such pursuits, without implicating others in his conduct, not merely as followers of his example, but as actual participators in the latitude he assumes, to whatever extent it may be carried. Here,

^c Matth. xviii. 7.

then, he who has so far the mastery over his appetites and passions, that he can come out harmless himself after a conflict with powerful incentives to evil, may yet have to answer for those among his associates who yield to their seductive influence. He may be a corrupter, without being corrupted; apparently unimpeachable himself, yet the immediate cause of guilt in others; intending no harm, but unconsciously doing irreparable injury.

Again; we meet with many who, not content with emancipating themselves, as they conceive, from unnecessary scruples or restraints, are forward to stigmatize every approach to a stricter system of duty, as superstition, or pharisaical ostentation. Desirous (as they profess) of simplifying religion, they incline to think and speak contemptuously of many blameless and decent customs, which others find useful, if not necessary, towards keeping alive a spirit of devotion. Hence they neglect, and even ridicule, the observance of stated seasons of penitence and thanksgiving, of private rules of abstinence, and of almost all external modes of religion not expressly enjoined by Divine authority. Now although it be true that these usages do not constitute the essence of religion, nor are generally necessary to men's salvation; yet it is

neither charitable nor discreet to offend serious and well-disposed persons by bringing them into contempt ; much less to give occasion to the ignorant and profane to justify, perhaps, their neglect of higher duties, by acting, as they conceive, upon similar principles.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that some offend against the apostolical rule, “ All things are lawful for me, but all things “ are not expedient,” by excess of zeal and overstrained scrupulosity. “ It is good,” says St. Paul, “ to be zealously affected in a good “ thing.” But at the same time he intimates that many have a “ zeal that is not according “ to knowledge^f.” When a desire of promoting the interests of religion leads to a censorious or a contentious spirit, religion suffers real injury ; and many will be disposed to regard it with an evil eye, from identifying its character with the conduct of its indiscreet disciples. Whatever rules, therefore, any individual may see fit to adopt for his own personal security, which are not in themselves of general or of indispensable obligation ; it behoves him to abstain from enforcing them upon others, or from dealing out uncharitable

^f Gal. iv. 18. Rom. x. 2.

censures against all who treat them as matters of lesser moment.

It were easy to extend these observations to other points of conduct than those which are immediately of religious concern. In matters sensibly affecting our well-being, as members of the state, and as individuals in private life, the Apostle's rule is continually violated, through want of that circumspection which weighs the *expediency*, as well as the *lawfulness* of every action.

How often do men foment political dissensions by the imprudence of their animadversions on public affairs! Here the boundaries of what is lawful are sometimes difficult to be determined: but the evils of speculating without reserve on abstract questions of civil liberty and political rights, or on the administration of public affairs, are sufficiently evident; though, if considered without reference to the times, and circumstances, and persons affected by them, the speculations themselves may seem to be perfectly harmless, and not to contravene any law, divine or human. Thousands may be led into practical error by theorists and experimentalists in political philosophy; who, whether or not with sinister intentions, spread opinions administering food

for discontent, and exciting in turbulent minds passions of the most destructive tendency.

In the narrower walks of private life, the evil consequences of a similar indiscretion are no less apparent. “Who is a wise man,” says St. James, “and endued with knowledge “amongst you? let him shew out of a good “conversation his works with meekness of “wisdom^g.” True wisdom is accompanied with that self-command, and that considerate regard to the effect likely to be produced by our general demeanour, which may prevent others from misinterpreting our views, or being ensnared into what is wrong through our example. But in the ordinary intercourse of society, who does not frequently offend in this respect? That intercourse will seldom be edifying,—it can hardly be inoffensive,—where no restraint is imposed on the thoughts that arise, or on the expressions in which they are clothed. That which is harmless in one society may be full of danger in another; and that which would be a mere waste of words in one case, will in another be highly profitable and instructive. St. Paul “became all things to all men^h.” He adapted his discourses and his instructions to the dif-

^g James iii. 13.

^h 1 Cor. ix. 22.

ferent dispositions and the different degrees of knowledge among those with whom he conversed. A similar regard to the prejudices, the habits, and the tempers of our respective associates is highly necessary, if we would avoid occasion of offence. Difficult questions on momentous points of religion may be fitly agitated among those who are well qualified for the discussion; but exceedingly unfit among them who are “weak in the faith,” or among “men of corrupt minds,” addicted to “perverse disputings.” To hazard even truths respecting persons, circumstances, and events, without considering to whom we confide them, may produce serious injury. The saying of the heathen poet, that *reverence is due to children*, intimating the caution to be used in their presence, is a maxim to be observed with regard to all whose want of knowledge or of judgment requires them to be treated as children in understanding. In administering reproof also, or giving advice, the same discretion is necessary. Solomon is full of wise apophthegms on this head. “Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee^k.” “A reproof entereth more into a wise man, than an hundred stripes

ⁱ Rom. xiv. 1. 1 Tim. vi. 5.

^k Prov. ix. 8.

“into a fool^l.” “A wise man’s heart discerneth both time and judgment^m.” “To every thing there is a season; and a time to every purposeⁿ.”

These scriptural instructions tend to illustrate the distinction between that which is barely lawful, and that which is also expedient; between that which in one case may be wise, useful, and necessary; in another, hazardous, indiscreet, injurious. Hence many similar admonitions of St. Paul. “Let not your good be evil spoken of.” “Let all things be done to edifying.” “Let no man put a stumblingblock, or an occasion to fall, in his brother’s way.” “When ye sin against the brethren, and wound their weak consciences, ye sin against Christ^o.”

To prevent, however, any abuse of these maxims, the Apostle elsewhere says, “Let every one of us please his neighbour, for his good, to edification^p.” The dispositions and characters of mankind are no further to be consulted than is conducive to their real welfare, and to the general interests of religion and virtue; edification being the end proposed in shunning to give offence, and in endeavouring to conciliate the good-will of

^l Prov. xvii. 10.

^m Eccles. viii. 5.

ⁿ Eccles. iii. 1.

^o 1 Cor. viii. 12.

^p Rom. xv. 2.

mankind. No dissimulation, no unworthy compliance, no compromise with truth, or deviation from Christian simplicity and integrity of character, may be justified on the ground of expediency, as inculcated in the sacred writings.

Neither are we so to interpret the Apostle's maxim in the text, as to make expediency the sole criterion of what is lawful, or the governing principle of moral obligation. The sense in which St. Paul applies the term, relates to actions which would be otherwise indifferent in themselves, or which are lawful only under particular circumstances. There is therefore an essential difference between what is lawful, and what is expedient only. The lawfulness of an action depends upon its being generally permitted or enjoined by Divine authority; its expediency depends upon the propriety of doing it under particular circumstances. That which is expedient in one case, may be inexpedient in another. But that which is in itself unlawful, or prohibited by the law of God, cannot be lawful at any time. Our first concern is to ascertain *this* fundamental ground of action; and then to consider the *other*. By reversing this order of proceeding, and setting up either general or particular expediency as a

primary rule of conduct, we may commit great errors, and confound our own imperfect notions of utility and the general good with those unerring rules of right and wrong, which rest upon the solid basis of the Divine will.

Our line of conduct then, with respect to this apostolical rule, is sufficiently clear. A reverential fear of God will lead us first to inquire what is His will; and determine us to act in no respect contrary to it, whatever may be the circumstances in which we are placed. The love of our fellow-creatures and a regard to our own special exigencies will next induce us to weigh well the probable consequences of every action upon ourselves and others, and determine us to act, or refrain from acting, as the occasion may demand. In the exercise of our judgment in this respect, discretion and charity will be requisite:—discretion, to prevent the good we intend from being perverted to evil;—charity, to guard against any possible injury to others, as well as to ourselves. Thus may the purest zeal for religion, the most scrupulous adherence to our own personal duties, and the most enlarged good-will towards mankind, be rendered compatible with each other. And then only may we truly say

with the Apostle, that we have “exercis-
“ed ourselves to have always a conscience
“void of offence towards God and towards
“men^q.”

^q Acts xxiv. 16.

S E R M O N XXIII.

EPHESIANS iv. 3.

Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

WHEN our blessed Lord intimated to his disciples his design of bringing the Gentile world, together with the Jews, into the Gospel-covenant, he emphatically declared that there should then be “ONE fold and ONE Shepherd^a.” The Jews were no longer to enjoy exclusively the privilege of being the chosen people of God; but all nations, kindreds, and tongues, were to have the offer of salvation, and to be united in one universal church, under one head, Jesus Christ. The Gentiles were no longer to worship, as heretofore, “gods many and lords many^b ;” but in the glory of the eternal Trinity to worship the Unity, and to acknowledge that only Lord and Saviour, whose coming the

^a John x. 16.

^b 1 Cor. viii. 5.

prophets and the patriarchs had foretold, and who was now to be generally revealed to mankind. Thus was the foundation laid for the unity of religious belief, which preeminently distinguishes the Christian dispensation; a dispensation, not partial or temporary, like that of the Jews, nor undefined and multiform, like the discordant systems of heathen superstition; but comprehending the whole human race; yet at the same time so clearly circumscribed as to the terms and conditions on which its benefits were to be received, that none could avail themselves of those benefits who would not keep within the fold, and obey the voice of the good Shepherd, who “knoweth his sheep, and is “known of them^c.”

Conformably with this representation, our Lord elsewhere describes the connection between himself and his disciples, and their connection also with each other, under a similitude implying the closest and most inseparable kind of union:—“I am the *vine*, and “ye are the *branches*. He that abideth in “me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth “much fruit: for without me ye can do “nothing^d.” He prays also for the Apostles, and for all that should believe on Him

^c John x. 14.

^d John xv. 5.

through their word, that “they all might be “*one* with Him and the Father, as He was “in the Father and the Father in Him^e.” The Apostles themselves, in the writings they have left for the instruction of the Church, abound in representations to the same effect. Their expositions of doctrine and their injunctions of practical duty are seldom unaccompanied with exhortations to unity and concord; not only inculcating in general terms the unbounded exercise of mutual love, forbearance, peace, and good-will; but more especially, unanimity in faith, in worship, in every thing that concerns the Church of God as a visible community, bound together by common interests and obligations. So faithfully did these preachers of the word enforce the injunctions of their Lord, and endeavour to infuse into all his professed disciples some portion of that spirit by which they themselves were actuated in the discharge of their high and sacred calling.

The effect of these admonitions on the first converts to Christianity appears to have been very conspicuous, notwithstanding the exceptions which occasionally called forth strong animadversions from the Apostles, and

^e John xvii. 21.

led to a reiteration of their injunctions. So great indeed was the change wrought in this respect among those who thoroughly embraced the Gospel, as strikingly to verify our Lord's prophetic saying, "By this shall all
"men know that ye are my disciples, if ye
"have love one to another^f."

But to what later period of Christian history can the same observation be faithfully applied? Does not every succeeding age furnish but too abundant proof that the profession of the Gospel has been made the instrument, or the pretext, of strife and confusion? Has it not brought in divisions and offences of various kinds, "giving occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme," and making the Gospel itself a subject of reproach and contumely to the libertine and the scoffer?—That the records of the Christian Church in early times, and still more those of later ages, have called forth such representations, is not to be denied.—What shall we say then? Does this holy, this pure, this blameless system contain within itself the seeds of disunion and disorder? Has it, from any inherent defect or imperfection, failed of its intended purpose, the purpose declared moreover by

^f John xiii. 35.

its heavenly Founder, and its divinely-gifted teachers ?

Assuredly not.—This consequence was foreseen, was foretold, by our Lord and his Apostles ; and the causes that would operate to produce it were no less distinctly declared. With reference to such feuds and animosities, our Lord says, “ Suppose ye that I am come
“ to give peace on earth ? I tell you, Nay ; but
“ rather divisions^g ;”—and again, “ It is im-
“ possible but that offences will come ; but
“ woe unto him through whom they come^h. ” The same subject is further illustrated in his impressive parable of the Tares. St. Paul in like manner affirms, “ There must be heresies
“ among you, that they which are approved
“ may be made manifestⁱ. ” He foretells that the time should come, when men would not
“ endure sound doctrine, but would turn away
“ their ears from the truth^k ;” and that “ in
“ the latter times some would depart from
“ the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits^l. ” He moreover speaks of “ the man of sin ” to
“ be revealed,” and of “ the mystery of ini-
“ quity^m ” which even then had begun to work. St. Peter prophecies of “ false teachers
“ who should privily bring in damnable here-

^g Luke xii. 51.

^h Luke xvii. 1.

ⁱ 1 Cor. xi. 19.

^k 2 Tim. iv. 3.

^l 1 Tim. iv. 1.

^m 2 Thess. ii. 3, 7.

“sies, even denying the Lord who bought them ;” that “many also should follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom the way of truth should be evil spoken ofⁿ.” St. Jude emphatically warns the faithful by similar predictions. St. John admonishes them to “try the spirits whether they be of God, because many false prophets had gone out into the world^o.” He speaks also of deceivers and antichrists springing up in the bosom of the Church ; and in the Apocalypse prophetically details a series of corruptions and persecutions by which the adherents to the pure Christian faith should suffer in after ages.

Such representations, not only predicting the evil but pointing out its source, prove that neither is our religion itself answerable for these consequences, nor are its Author and its first preachers chargeable with any deception or delusion in this respect. The Gospel tends to promote unity and concord ; but the machinations of the perverse and evil-minded introduce disunion and discord. The householder “soweth good seed in his field ;” but “the enemy cometh and soweth tares.” Hence the distractions and divisions of the Christian world. And these evils, be it ob-

ⁿ 2 Peter ii. 1, 2.

^o 1 John iv. 1.

served, are not unfrequently occasioned by Christians themselves. Their hand too often inflicts the wound by which the Gospel suffers, and its adversaries triumph. A disorganizing spirit within the citadel effects that mischief which otherwise the external assailant might never be able to compass. Even the warmest friends of Christianity may unwittingly be accessory to the injury. Mistaken views of unity, charity, and peace, lead many to foster those divisions which they most earnestly deprecate, and to perpetuate errors which they would fain persuade themselves they are labouring to remove. So necessary is it to form correct notions on a subject, which, however lightly regarded by inconsiderate observers, is intimately connected with the vital interests of religion. Let us hear, then, by what reasoning the Apostle enforces the duty pressed upon the Ephesians, that of “endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The argument is thus comprehensively stated in the verses immediately following the text:—“There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” Let us

observe how closely these several propositions are connected with each other.

“ There is *One Body*.”—Christ is expressly called “ the Head of the Church,” and the Church “ the body of Christ.” No figure of speech can more distinctly represent the necessary and inseparable connection subsisting between them. As whatever is separated from the body ceases, by that separation, to derive any benefit from it ;—and as the head is essential to the life and energy, the government and direction of the members ;—so, every member of Christ’s body, the Church, derives from HIM, its head, every thing requisite for spiritual instruction and control, every thing needful for growth in grace, and the attainment of salvation.—There is *One Spirit* also which pervades this body, and which was purchased for us by the blood of Christ.—There is “ *One Hope of our calling ;*” a hope, common to all true members of the body, and resulting from the same Spirit.—There is *One Lord*, even our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom we owe this blessing.—There is *One Faith*, by which the members of his body are distinguished, faith in HIM as the Author of salvation, and the Lord whom they are bound to obey.—There is *One Baptism*, ordained as the means of

receiving these benefits, and a pledge to assure us of the fulfilment of His promises. Finally, “there is *One God and Father of all*, “who is above all, and through all, and in “all.” In HIM all these benefits originate. By HIM, in union with the Son and the Holy Spirit, they were planned and accomplished. To HIS wisdom and goodness, His justice and mercy, His power and dominion, they owe their existence and their effect.

On these grounds the Apostle inculcates the duty of “endeavouring to keep the unity “of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Christians, however widely scattered over the face of the earth, are called to the profession of the same faith, to a participation of the same privileges, to an acknowledgment of the same hope, to the use of the same means of grace. They are consequently one body. The same duties and obligations devolve upon all: the same terms of acceptance are open to all. The Gospel is the charter declaratory of their rights and privileges, of which one tittle shall not pass away until all be fulfilled. Well, then, may we ask, How can the injunction in the text be made to consist with that endless diversity of opinions which has found its way into the Church of Christ, and the encouragement of

which seems by many to be considered as essential to true Christian liberty? If there be but one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, where is the dispensation to be found for cancelling this bond of unity, and setting up imaginary persuasions in its stead?

Strange, however, are the prevailing notions on this subject. Speak of adherence to *one* body, *one* hope, or *one* faith, as a Christian duty; and instant is the cry of bigotry and intolerance. Press the Apostle's doctrine of "unity of Spirit" as an indispensable obligation; and presently a new "bond of peace" is recommended to our acceptance; a principle of association by which we are to receive as brethren in Christ, men whose faith and hope admit of almost every contrariety of opinion;—a principle which shall embrace those who virtually "deny the Lord who "bought them," and those who besides Him set up other lords and mediators between God and man; which shall equally countenance them who altogether deny the operation or even the existence of the Holy Spirit, and them who ascribe to His special influence all the crudities of their own wild imaginations;—a principle which shall call upon us

to hold communion with such as turn the sacraments into acts of idolatrous superstition, and with such as acknowledge neither sacraments nor priesthood;—in other words, a principle that while nominally professing “*one* God and Father of all,” seems to ascribe to him as versatile a character as can be conceived of the most fickle of mankind. Such appears, at least, to be the tendency of some novel schemes of latitudinarianism, countenanced even by well-disposed persons, as constituting a broad and solid basis whereon all denominations of Christians may safely and conscientiously unite. Thus a new species of catholic unity is introduced. No longer is the universal Church to be distinguished by uniformity of faith and worship, of doctrine or of discipline; but is to admit every diversity of opinion, and to be amalgamated in one common mass with every device that human imagination can engraft upon the word of God. How far such views of the subject can be reconciled with the authority of Holy Writ, and what are the essential characteristics of that unity and peace which the Apostle inculcates, it is therefore surely of importance to inquire.

Doubtless it is the distinguishing mark of Christianity, that it opens the door of salva-

tion to every one that is willing to enter ; that it regards all mankind as children of one common Parent, who though they have erred and strayed from his ways, may be restored to his paternal love and favour through the redemption and intercession of an all-powerful Saviour. The benefits of this dispensation of grace and mercy are designed to be co-extensive with the penalties incurred by every son of Adam. We cannot therefore form conceptions too enlarged of the salvation here offered ; nor can we render it too comprehensive as to the objects to whom it may be extended. It is no wonder, then, that every one who has imbibed the true Christian spirit should be willing to open wide the door of faith, and to welcome within it all who are desirous of admittance. Universal philanthropy, that captivating sound to modern ears, never can have a nobler field of action, than in carrying into effect the vast purpose for which this heavenly gift was imparted to mankind.

But while we are solicitous to enlarge to the utmost the boundaries of our Lord's kingdom, and "without respect of persons," would bid to the marriage feast as many as will come in ; still must we remember that it is not in our power to alter the tenor of that covenant,

by which all who obtain admission are necessarily bound. Over that we have no control. “As many as walk after that rule, peace be upon them, and upon the Israel of God^p.” But no latitude being given for a departure from that rule, the privilege of Church-membership, however in other respects unlimited and universal, can only be effectual when exercised in conformity with the will of its heavenly Founder. The inference is obvious. Though we enlarge our views of Christianity to its utmost extent, though our charity be as expansive as the Gospel itself, we cannot extend its benefits further than that sacred charter extends them. We cannot alter or modify that charter; we cannot dispense with any one of its conditions. We cannot commute faith for works, or works for faith. We cannot take upon us to say, that he who denies the divinity of the Redeemer, and he who acknowledges Him as his Lord and his God, stand upon equal ground. We cannot, instead of one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, acknowledge many bodies of diverse kinds, many discordant spirits, many hopes growing out of dissimilar persuasions, many different objects of worship, many conflicting articles of faith, many bap-

^p Gal. vi. 16.

tisms or modes of admission into the Christian covenant. For this would be to annul the charter itself: and almost as well might we affirm that there are “Gods many and “Lords many,” of opposite wills and purposes, as that “one God and Father of all” should be the Author of such contrariety and confusion.

It therefore does not follow, that because the Christian religion is universal in its design and extent, we are at liberty to hold communion with all who profess to belong to it, without regard to their respective tenets. St. Paul’s view of the subject evidently leads to a contrary conclusion. “The unity of the “Spirit” implies an agreement in that faith which the Spirit of God hath revealed; and this agreement is called “the bond of peace,” because by it men are bound together in religious love and harmony, and walk together in the way that leadeth to eternal life. Such harmony cannot subsist where there is a manifest contrariety of sentiment on points essential and fundamental. It is absurd to suppose it, unless we suppose that men are in reality altogether indifferent as to those things which they nevertheless acknowledge to be of the first importance.

But in thus contending for union in reli-

gious sentiment as a bond of harmonious co-operation, it is not intended to represent this as necessary for maintaining the ordinary relations of peace and amity in social life. We can hardly expect (considering the variety of habits, dispositions, and understandings of men) that an entire uniformity of religious opinion should ever be attainable. Nor need we enter upon the question respecting that connection between civil and ecclesiastical polity, to which the subject may seem to lead. The point at present in discussion is simply that which relates to our own individual conduct in upholding religious truth. It is meant to shew, that in matters of religion there can be no assurance of cordial unanimity, nor any security for the preservation of our own faith, without a concurrence, among those with whom we hold communion, in what is deemed, on both sides, to be of fundamental importance. When St. Paul says, “I beseech you, “brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus “Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and “that there be no divisions among you; but “that ye be perfectly joined together in the “same mind and in the same judgment^q,” the least that he can be supposed to mean, is, that there should be no disagreement respecting

^q 1 Cor. i. 10.

the main truths of the Gospel. And when he prays, that “the God of patience and consolation might grant them to be like-minded one towards another according to Christ Jesus, that they might with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ^r ;” the expressions are equivalent to “endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace ;” and they imply, that to encourage discordancy of religious sentiment is wholly inconsistent with Christian simplicity of character. Yet does not this require us to break asunder the ties of social life, or to shun the accustomed intercourse of affection and good-will among those with whom we cannot conscientiously unite in matters of religion. St. Paul’s maxim is, “Do good unto all men, and especially unto them that are of the household of faith^s ;” and “if it be possible, as much as in you lieth, live peaceably with all men^t .” However divided among themselves as to the truth, men may be so far “like-minded,” as to forbear mutual railing and reviling : and unaffected kindness and good offices may be reciprocated without compromising on either side that steadfastness of principle which is inseparable from real integrity of character.

^r Rom. xv. 5.^s Gal. vi. 10.^t Rom. xii. 18.

Applying, then, this subject to ourselves, members of a national Church eminently distinguished by its conformity to that “wisdom “from above,” which “is first pure, then peace-“able, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of “mercy and good fruits, without partiality, “and without hypocrisy,” our line of duty cannot easily be mistaken. We pray for our national Establishment as a “pure and apostolical branch” of Christ’s holy Catholic Church; and to that designation it is surely well entitled. Its doctrine, its discipline, its priesthood, its sacraments, its whole ritual, possess every requisite to give them validity and effect. Its authority is clearly founded on that of “the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus “Christ himself being the chief corner-stone”;” and it has long since been purified from those errors and corruptions which had been superinduced upon it by papal usurpation. To maintain it in this purity, and to secure it against a relapse into those errors, on the one hand, and against wanton innovations on the other, is a sacred duty incumbent on every one who knows how to appreciate the benefits it imparts. “A house divided against itself “cannot stand^x;” nor is God “the author of

^v James iii. 17.

^w Ephes. ii. 20.

^x Mark iii. 25.

“confusion, but of peace.” The peace, indeed, of the whole community, of those who separate from the Church as well as of those who adhere to it, mainly depends upon that singleness of heart, that honest simplicity of character and conduct, which never can be otherwise than respected, whatever may be the shades of difference which separate parties from each other. It is not the mere semblance of unity, the attempt at a spurious coalition of sects or individuals, that can reasonably be expected to produce this effect. It is the honest and undisguised maintenance, on each side, of what each holds to be the truth, with Christian lenity and forbearance towards what each deems to be error in the other party, which must lay the foundation of peace and good-will.

The same feelings in this respect should influence our daily conduct towards each other which, it is to be presumed, occupy our thoughts and affections when we present ourselves before the Holy Altar, to partake of those sacred mysteries which our Lord himself ordained “as pledges of His love, and for
“a continual remembrance of His death, to
“our great and endless comfort.” There we address our heavenly Father, as “members

“incorporate in the mystical body of his “Son ;” and, as such, virtually declare our adherence to that body, framed and constituted as it is by Him its author and founder. The sincerity of this our professed attachment to His faith and worship is one requisite towards a worthy performance of that solemn rite. It is another requisite, that we “be “in charity with all men.” And surely these are not incompatible services, not incongruous feelings. If “the unity of the Spirit” is to be kept “in the bond of peace,” then is charity its proper fruit, which is “the very bond “of peace and of all virtues,” and “without “which all our doings are nothing worth.” This charity, moreover, we are to have for all men; for those who are within the Church, and those who refuse to enter it; nay, for those who never heard of the Gospel, and even those who have rejected it. No degree of error, no degree of perverseness or hardness of heart, exempts men from this claim on our prayers and our endeavours to do them good. As our merciful Redeemer “would “have all men to be saved^z,” as the Almighty is “not willing that any should perish, but “that all should come to repentance^a,” so are we to cooperate in that gracious pur-

^z 1 Tim. ii. 4.

^a 2 Peter iii. 9.

pose, by endeavouring to “bring all men to “the knowledge of the truth,” and, if they have gone astray, to recall them to “the “Shepherd and Bishop of their souls^b.”

This is the highest exercise of Christian charity, the surest means of promoting “Glory “to God, peace on earth, and good-will towards men^c.” The glory of God is promoted, when He is “worshipped in spirit “and in truth^d.”—Peace on earth is diffused, when unanimity prevails in Christian faith and Christian practice, when the same principle of conduct actuates the whole body, and men live in unity and concord here, by keeping steadfastly in view those hopes and promises, those duties and obligations, which lay the foundation of their meeting together hereafter, where everlasting peace and harmony shall be found among “the spirits of just men “made perfect^e.”—Good-will towards men, individually as well as collectively, cannot also but be increased, when every one is thus intent upon working out his own salvation in the way which God hath appointed, and is zealous in persuading and encouraging others to do the same.—That such may be the blessed result of all our labours for the glory of God

^b 1 Peter ii. 25.

^c Luke ii. 14.

^d John iv. 24.

^e Heb. xii. 23.

and the good of mankind, let our fervent prayers be offered up to the Author and Giver of all good things, that “His will may
“be done in earth as it is in heaven ;” that
“His continual pity may cleanse and defend
“his Church ;” and that “because it cannot
“continue in safety without His succour, it
“may be preserved evermore by His help and
“goodness, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

SERMON XXIV.

MATTHEW v. 16.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

WERE we to rest the perfection of our blessed Saviour's character as a public Teacher upon the evidence of any one of his discourses in particular, his Sermon on the Mount might be selected as affording, perhaps, the most remarkable proof of his divine pretensions. Distinguished as it is for extraordinary simplicity and clearness, in developing those principles of human conduct which were thenceforth to be considered as binding upon all who would embrace His religion; it at the same time discovers such an insight into human nature, and such an elevation of sentiment, as never yet were attained by mere philosophical instructors. Whether we view it with reference to active or to contemplative life; whether we apply it to men's interests in this present world, or to those which await

them in a future state ; it points to each with the effect which authority only, authority unimpeachable and infallible, could produce. In this respect, it may well be said to be commensurate with those other “ demonstrations “ of the Spirit and of power^a,” by which his heavenly mission was more directly verified.

Our Lord had, indeed, already obtained among the people a reputation of no ordinary kind. The declarations of his forerunner John the Baptist concerning him, and the fame of his wonderful works, had begun to raise expectations of his being the great Deliverer foretold by the Prophets. Those very expectations, however, while they served to awaken the attention of his hearers, laid him so much the more open to rigid scrutiny. They exposed him, on all sides, to such animadversions as must speedily have silenced his pretensions, had he failed in any instance to sustain the character he assumed. It is no inconsiderable proof, therefore, of his just claims to that high character, that he was able to abide this ordeal ; that in no instance did he administer to the corrupt affections or erroneous prejudices of his followers ; but with uncompromising firmness, yet at the same time with the utmost mild-

^a 1 Cor. ii. 4.

ness and forbearance, discountenanced and opposed the sentiments most prevalent among them, and most in unison with the notions they had formed of the purpose of his mission.

This is strikingly instanced in the several *beatitudes*, as they are called, set forth at the opening of his discourse. Instead of encouraging the pursuit of worldly honour, wealth, or dominion; instead of holding out inducements of ease, luxury, and temporal grandeur; instead of promising earthly conquests and the subjugation of rival and hostile powers;—what are the expectations offered, what the qualities declared to be indispensable for admission into His kingdom?—humility, self-denial, meekness, forbearance, purity, patience under tribulation and adversity. The only superiority to which he bids them aspire, is that of setting an example edifying to the rest of mankind. The only splendour wherewith he would have them invested, is the lustre of unostentatious qualities gradually winning men to the truth, and leading to the adoption of that religion from which they proceeded. Nor were they to content themselves with the scanty measure of excellence hitherto meted out to them by their religious instructors; but “except

“their righteousness exceeded that of the
“Scribes and Pharisees, they would in no
“case enter into the kingdom of heaven^b.”
—What impostor would have thus begun his
career? What enthusiast would have sub-
mitted his pretensions to a test like this?
What worldly projector, ambitious of power
or of fame, would have risked his popularity
by such unwelcome admonitions?

But it may be asked, how will these repre-
sentations consist with the injunction, “Let
“your light so shine before men, that they
“may see your good works, and glorify your
“Father which is in heaven?”—The poor in
spirit, they that mourn, the meek, they who
hunger and thirst after righteousness, the
merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers,
the reviled and persecuted;—are these the
characters to attract the admiration of the
multitude; or will mankind in general be in-
clined, from such effects of a religion, to adopt
it as their own? Who would expect the
teacher of doctrines like these, to exhort his
followers to set themselves up for patterns to
the rest of mankind, in the persuasion that any
who were conversant with the world would
partake of their views and sentiments?

It requires no great extent of observation

^b Matth. v. 20.

or research to obviate these supposed inconsistencies, and to vindicate the wisdom, no less than the purity, the sanctity, and the benevolence, of the heavenly instructor from whom these precepts issued.

What, let us ask, are the most fruitful sources of evil and misery throughout the human race? What so fruitful, or so frequent, as the qualities most opposite to those which our Lord here sets forth as essential to the religion he promulgated? Consider the effects of pride, of a mind swollen with uninterrupted prosperity, of uncontrolled resentment, of inordinate love of the world, of oppression, of sensuality, of a turbulent spirit, of a fear of incurring worldly censure, of irresolution and want of firmness in upholding righteousness and truth. How extensively do these spread their influence, and how fearfully do they operate in poisoning every enjoyment of social life! True it is, that some of these odious dispositions are far from being direct obstacles to men's personal advancement in the world, and that some of them may even be attended with incidental benefit to others, as well as to themselves. The aggrandizement of an individual may be brought about by that recklessness of evil consequences which pushes forward to its object, without fear of

God or man; and a bold bad man, while he earns preeminence to himself, may carry along with him many more upon whom the success of his enterprises may heap similar distinctions. Many also who act upon the most selfish principles may find it conducive to their own sordid purpose to ingratiate themselves with mankind by deeds of public utility and private beneficence, the better either to conceal the end they have in view, or to forward its accomplishment. Casually also, though not designedly, some benefits may accrue to society from the operation of the worst dispositions and intentions in their influence upon mankind; a result, to be attributed only to the unceasing control of that Almighty power who “hath made all things “for Himself^c,” and who can render the evil passions of men, no less than “the stormy “wind and tempest,” conducive to good, even whilst they are spreading havock and destruction. But these results in no respect affect the general position we are now maintaining. The evil actions or dispositions of men can never be said, in themselves, to promote the *glory of God*; nor by any possible perversion of sentiment be entitled to the same estima-

^c Prov. xvi. 4.

tion with the “good works” which are to form the splendour of the Christian character. Their immediate tendency, and their necessary consequence, except so far as they may be overruled by a superintending Providence, is to make the world a scene of disorder and discomfort, and to increase and perpetuate the evils of our fallen nature.

On the other hand, the dispositions solemnly commended and blessed by our heavenly Lord and Master, however little they may be felt, understood, or practised, by an unthankful and unbelieving world, are precisely those which, while they give the highest possible elevation of spiritual character to their possessors, in no respect lessen their means of promoting the general good; neither do they preclude the exercise of the most powerful energies of the human mind, or in any way incapacitate men for becoming valuable members of the community, or advancing their own honourable reputation. Reflect, for a moment, how each of these is adapted to work upon the mind and to affect the conduct. Humility, whatever lowliness or self-abasement it may imply towards God or man, does not destroy that consciousness of integrity and rectitude, which incites to firmness and perseverance; on the contrary

it best secures these, through the influence of that salutary caution, “happy is the man that feareth alway^d.” Adversity endured with unrepining submission and fortitude, has something in its very aspect, that rarely fails to command respect, and whether it awakens or not the commiseration of others, reads an edifying lesson not easily to be disregarded. Purity of heart implies a manly resistance of temptation, never the associate of a weak and pusillanimous spirit. Fervent devotion lifts the soul above sordid pursuits, and dispels the baser passions of our nature. Mercy instantaneously prompts to good offices, wherever there are troubles to be alleviated or wants to be supplied. Meekness, peaceableness, patient endurance of injuries, resoluteness in upholding what is right and true, under every difficulty and danger; surely these are not virtues to be contemned or lightly esteemed; since they can only “have their perfect work^e,” when under the influence of that self-control which “overcomes evil with good^f,” and which is among the highest graces of the Christian character, wrought in the heart by the Spirit of God himself.

Again; not only do these qualities shed

^d Prov. xxviii. 14.

^e James i. 4.

^f Rom. xii. 21.

the purest lustre upon those who possess them, and fill the heart “with all joy and “peace in believing,” but (what is more to our immediate purpose) they seldom are regarded by others but with correspondent feelings of approbation. Obscurity of station or secluded habits of life may occasionally intercept them from public notice; but even under the most disadvantageous circumstances, they will not entirely escape observation, or fail to make some effective impression. When they have ampler scope; when from being united to higher rank and station they come in contact with the greater interests of social life; then will their influence be more deeply and more generally felt. It will then be seen that these are not the virtues of solitude only, or of lowly condition; not the exclusive characteristics of men who have forsaken the world, or are forsaken by it; but that they adorn, improve, and elevate every rank and every occupation. And though even our best actions are forbidden to be done from the sole motive of being “seen of men,” and obtaining a full reward here; yet are we encouraged, nay enjoined, to do them with the hope of leading others, through our influence and example, in like manner to glorify the Divine Author of our being.

To these observations, however in themselves sufficient to establish the point in question, we may add the testimony of history and experience.

Among the secondary causes contributing to the progress of the Gospel, even the infidel historian acknowledges the extraordinary lustre of Christian virtues to have been one of the most prevailing. And what were those virtues? The very same to which our heavenly Master annexed His special blessing; the passive virtues of humble resignation to the Divine will, and meek endurance of suffering for righteousness' sake; the active virtues of zeal in the cause of truth, and charity the most diffusive and unbounded. These were the seeds which sprang up and multiplied an hundred fold. Men saw and wondered at the power able to sustain the mind under the tortures of martyrdom and the scorn of an unbelieving world. They revered the unaffected sanctity of a pure and blameless conduct, putting to shame the corruptions of heathen licentiousness. They beheld with delight the ardour of mutual charity and affection between men united in one common bond of faith and hope; and even from the ruthless persecutors of this unoffending race burst

forth, as by an irresistible impulse, expressions of admiration and astonishment at these rare and exalted virtues. Such was the light that shone in the patterns exhibited by the primitive Christian converts. Such was its efficacy also, in gradually persuading men first to investigate the source from which it proceeded, and then to look to that source for their own guidance and illumination.

Who, then, with such evidence before him, will question the excellency of Christian virtues, or their tendency to take strong hold both upon the affections and the understandings of men, when set before them in their genuine and unadulterated purity? Who will say that they are the virtues of the cloister only, or of visionary devotees, and have no congeniality with the ordinary concerns of common life, or with the high and lofty energies called forth in greater undertakings for the public good? With none of these are they irreconcilable, where real good is contemplated; nor where good is really sought, will they ever be contemned or slighted. He who “knew what is in man^g,”—He who himself was no recluse, but daily “went about “doing good^h,” and mixed with society in various circumstances and conditions,—adapt-

^g John ii. 25.

^h Acts x. 38.

ed his precepts also to all ranks and degrees of men, without “respect of persons,” and with no view of confining his religion to “the desert” or “the secret chambers.” How, indeed, shall those persons acquit themselves of numberless duties enjoined in the Gospel, who, according to our Lord’s strong expression, “light their candle, and put it under a “bushelⁱ,” or, intent only upon their own salvation, expend not a care or a thought upon the world at large, equally in need of light and information? That great heights of virtue and piety, that extreme rigour of self-denial and humiliation, that extraordinary fervours of devotion and aspirations after heavenly things, may be attained by monastic rules of life, or by solitary seclusion from the world, cannot be denied; nor is it to be questioned that the recluse escapes many temptations to evil which beset those who partake in the busy scenes of life. But it may be questioned whether some duties are not thus performed at the expense of others not less imperative; and also whether temptations to one description of evil are not thus escaped, by incurring those of another description no less perilous. It is at least evident that neither the example of our Lord,

ⁱ Matth. v. 15.

or of his Apostles, can thus be duly imitated ; and that many a precept of the Gospel is made virtually a dead letter, a nullity in spirit and signification, where such a kind of apathy to the general interests of mankind becomes the predominant affection.

This needs no further illustration. But something yet remains to be said respecting that which our Lord brings forward as the ultimate purpose of whatever we do, “the glorifying our Father which is in heaven.”

Since every duty incumbent upon us has its primary foundation in the will of God, the performance of every duty may, in a general sense, be said to redound to the glory of God ; more especially when it is done from the pure principle of obedience to that will. But many splendid acts of beneficence, of devotion, and of self-denial, may have been prompted by motives of a very different kind ; motives, which not only detract greatly from the value of such actions, but destroy their character as Christian virtues. “ Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor,” says the Apostle, and “ though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing^k.” Worldly interest, ostentation, misdirected zeal, may all operate in producing

^k 1 Cor. xiii. 3.

such effects, where no genuine regard to religious principle prevails.

Now, although so far as the immediate welfare of society is concerned, the effect, in many instances, may appear to be much the same in the one case as in the other, yet in a moral point of view, it must not hence be inferred that the real benefit to mankind is the same, much less that the honour of God is equally promoted. The community may have reason to bless God for good thus incidentally accruing even from the illaudable motives of human actions ; and may reasonably admire and applaud the agents themselves, so long as nothing appears to raise a just suspicion of sinister intention. But from the instant such a sinister intention is discovered, the character of the deed itself will, in the general estimation, be totally changed, and what would otherwise have been highly approved, will be despised and abhorred. No one will applaud the alms manifestly given from ostentation only. No one will hold up to imitation the zealot or the ascetic, who clearly shews to the world that his object is to be the idol of an ignorant multitude. In all such cases, well regulated minds cannot but revolt at the attempt to impose upon their feelings and understandings ; and instead of

regarding such conduct as “glorifying God,” they will rather regard it as bringing religion itself into discredit, and incurring the Divine displeasure. However frequently, therefore, the hypocrite may “have his reward,” in successfully practising upon the credulity of others, or however others may seem to profit by his crooked policy, detection instantly dispels the charm, and the seeming good is seen to be practically evil, injurious both to God and man.

Our Lord’s injunction, then, must be understood to mean, Let your good works be so manifestly and incontestably done upon the principle of religious duty, that all who witness them may be assured that to this they owe their real excellence. Then will they perceive that the glory is due to God. The fruit will evidence the goodness of the tree. The heart and the deed will appear in unison with each other. The faith of others will be strengthened, their hope exalted, their charity enlarged. By the same test they will be led to judge themselves also, and will learn on what foundation to rest their own “confidence towards God.” Every Christian is indeed thus bound to look well to the foundation on which he builds his pretensions to religion. He is bound to consider whether he really

cherishes and cultivates those seeds of Christian perfection, to which alone our Lord has promised a blessing. Imaginary notions of excellence, or of utility, incompatible with these, will neither permanently advance the interests of the Gospel, nor obtain its final recompense.

Many a project regarded with admiration and pursued with eagerness by the undiscerning multitude, will be little able to abide this scrutiny. The world is full of devices for the improvement of mankind, plausible in appearance, but resting on no solid basis of Christian principle. Even Christianity itself is not unfrequently put forward to sanction that which partakes but little of its genuine character. There is no want among us of energy and activity, capable of producing great and splendid benefits, were it under the control of sound judgment and well-regulated piety. But where these are wanting, fame is but “as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal¹,” and the good that results will be but as “a morning cloud, and as the early dew that goeth away^m.”—That which is most needed among us in the present day is a steadfast, yet moderated zeal for the truth, equally remote from languor and impetuosity,

¹ 1 Cor. xiii. 1.

^m Hosea vi. 4.

vigilant and strenuous in defending the bulwarks of our faith, charitable and circumspect in conducting its defence. On the one hand, is to be avoided that restless spirit which wastes its strength in ill-applied exertions; on the other, that somnolency which slumbers in the midst of dangers, that apathy which is indifferent to the great interests intrusted to us for their preservation and support.

The well-instructed Christian, seeing thus the path of duty, and sensible of what importance, in pursuing it, may be the effect of his own individual example and exertions, will not rest satisfied with his inward persuasion of what is right and good, but will embrace every opportunity of testifying its influence upon his mind. Thus his personal virtues will both benefit mankind and promote the glory of God. Even in the remotest walks of life he will shine as a light to others. In a more public and elevated sphere, the demands of society upon him, and the imperative calls of religious duty, will be proportionably increased. Negative worth alone will not satisfy these demands. If the single talent buried in the earth bring a condemnation upon the unprofitable servant, how much more the waste, the neglect,

of five or ten ! To those who are thus gifted, religion looks for especial support, protection, and aid. She expects the appropriate labours of the learned, the munificence of the wealthy, the patronage of the powerful, the leisure that ease and affluence can command, the vigour which native talents can supply. Wherever good is to be done ; wherever piety, virtue, and humanity are to be promoted ; wherever truth is to be vindicated, or error to be discountenanced or restrained ; all ranks and degrees of men owe their respective contributions and exertions. In no other way can the sacred precept in the text be faithfully and effectually fulfilled.

That such examples do indeed abound among us in the present day, it were ungrateful to deny ;—examples of persons who, in every station or occupation, may truly be said to “ adorn the doctrine of God their Saviourⁿ ;” and whose influence, whether more or less perceptible upon the mass of the community, cannot but be widely diffusive and extensively beneficial. Nor may we doubt that in the eye of an all-seeing God, whose glory is thus manifested to the world, these are among the surest tokens that, whatever may be our demerits as a people, we are not

ⁿ Titus ii. 10.

yet entirely cast out of his favour and regard. Fearful indeed would be the times, when “the faithful” should “fail from among the children of men^o.” No surer prognostick could be imagined of the impending judgments of the Almighty, than that a people should thus be bereft of its best human safeguard; if indeed any judgment could be more severe, or more certainly fatal, than that which leaves a nation to its own devices; undisciplined, unrestrained, uncontrolled by those feelings of love or fear towards HIM “whose kingdom ruleth over all,” which alone can preserve it from working its own downfall and destruction.

They who view the subject in this light, and are sensible that “the loving-kindness of God is better than life itself^p,” will be solicitous to increase the number and the influence of those whose purity of faith and practice may draw down the Divine blessing upon their country. To them, under Providence, will it be owing, that we may still flourish among surrounding nations, and that our Church may still continue to be “a praise in the earth^q.” Nor will they be discouraged from this perseverance in well-doing, under any circumstances of conflict, of diffi-

^o Psalm xii. 1.

^p Psalm lxiii. 3.

^q Isaiah lxvii. 2.

culty, or of danger, under any obloquy or opposition from the enemies of righteousness and truth ; knowing that it must ever be to their own temporal and eternal benefit, as well as to the welfare of the state, thus to acquit themselves as “ blameless and harmless, the “ sons of God without rebuke, in the midst of “ a crooked and perverse generation ;” and that they shall “ rejoice in the day of Christ, “ that they have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain ^r.”

^r Phil. ii. 15, 16.

SERMON XXV^a.

ISAIAH lvii. 1.

The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart.

WHATEVER may have been the particular occasion of this complaint, its immediate purport requires little explanation. In the preceding chapter, the Prophet gives some striking proofs of the deplorable state of religion and morals in the kingdom of Judah. In this, he begins with noticing the strange apathy and indifference of the people, with respect to events (then probably of recent occurrence) calculated to awaken them to serious reflection:—"The righteous perisheth, " and no man layeth it to heart."

^a Preached before the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn, on Sunday, May 31, 1812, on the occasion of the Assassination of the Right Hon. Spencer Perceval, and printed at the request of the Treasurer and Masters of the Bench, June 1812.

Conjectures have been formed, whether the Prophet here adverts to the death of any particular person of distinguished eminence ; or whether he speaks, in general terms, of some unexpected and extraordinary diminution in the number of good and faithful men. This point cannot now be ascertained by historical evidence. But the force of the reproof, that no man laid the event to heart, is, in either case, the same ; and the admonition resulting from it is of equal weight, to all for whose learning these Scriptures were written.

The Prophet, however, can hardly be understood to mean, that the death of such persons was universally disregarded, or that the event excited no degree of sympathy or concern among their fellow-countrymen. It will suffice, to justify his complaint, that there was a general want of consideration as to the probable design of Providence in occurrences so deeply affecting the public welfare. “No man layeth it to heart :”—no man duly reflects upon it as a Divine visitation. Absorbed in their own personal interests, or given up to the pursuits of the moment, they regard not the hand of the Almighty, however visibly lifted up ; nor recognise His purpose, though written in characters legible to all who will take pains to read them.

This will ever be the case, when the sense of religion is deadened by an habitual neglect of its duties, or by that perverse turn of mind which ascribes every thing to time and chance, and to circumstances independent of the Divine will. It is indeed one principal feature in the contrast between the faithful servant of God and the careless or unbelieving man of the world, that the former “sets God always “before him,” endeavouring to perceive and understand His will in the occurrences of this lower world: while the latter takes no cognizance of them in a *religious* view, “neither is God in all his thoughts.”

When such insensibility or inconsideration becomes general, (as appears to have been the case with the people of Judah,) the moral decay of the body politic may be considered as far advanced. For, it is impossible that indifference in this respect can consist with that regard for religious principle, on which depends the vital strength of every community, and which can alone give a reasonable expectation of the Divine favour. That “the righteous should be had in everlasting remembrance^b,” is not only a tribute due to the virtues of good men deceased; but it is a duty we owe to our country and

^b Psalm cxii. 6.

ourselves, who are to profit by their examples; and to God, whom we are to “bless for all “his servants departed this life in His faith “and fear.” According to the disposition, therefore, that is shewn, when “the righteous perisheth” to “lay it to heart,” in the full and proper acceptation of that phrase, we may be led to hope, or to despond, respecting the national character. And more especially shall we be inclined to regard this as a just criterion of the public feeling, when persons of pre-eminent worth, filling the most important public stations, are suddenly and fearfully taken away from us. Such events, however, will affect in different ways the minds of different observers. They will awaken feelings of sympathy, of grief, of indignation, or of terror, correspondent with the prevailing tempers and circumstances of the parties affected. They will be viewed, with reference to their public or their private consequences, according to the degree of importance attached to either of those views. But under every different aspect, some scope will necessarily be afforded for spiritual edification.

With reference to its private or personal consequences, the death of the righteous affords at all times, and under all circumstances,

the most solid grounds of hope and consolation. Their removal, therefore, however sudden or violent, is not to be regarded as an act of Divine judgment upon themselves. The chastisement, if it be such, is inflicted, not on them, but on those who survive them. They “are taken away,” says the Prophet, “from the evil to come, that they may enter “into peace.” Though they appear to be prematurely cut off, their departure even in the prime of life is but a more speedy entrance into that state, “where the wicked “cease from troubling, and the weary be at “rest^c.” To them, “to die is gain^d.” Neither can they be said to “perish,” in any other sense than as disappearing from this earthly scene. Their bodies are indeed “committed to the ground, earth to earth, ashes “to ashes, dust to dust.” But it is “in sure “and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the mean while, “the keeping of their “souls is committed unto God in well-doing, “as unto a faithful Creator^e.” “The spirit “returns unto God who gave it^f.” In the intermediate state provided for it till its reunion with the body, it rests not in an un-

^c Job iii. 17.

^e 1 Pet. iv. 19.

^d Phil. i. 21.

^f Eccles. xii. 7.

consciousness or insensibility of its condition, but in a lively anticipation of its “perfect consummation and bliss in God’s eternal and everlasting glory.”

This consolation, then, attends the death of the righteous, in whatever way the stroke may have been inflicted. Sudden death, no doubt, is a fearful evil; one which we are all bound to deprecate, and which even they who are best prepared for it will hardly have the presumption to contemplate without some feeling of dismay. Perhaps this feeling is inseparable from just views of religion. For, “happy is the man that feareth always^s :” and if “in many things we offend all,” who will not shrink from the thought of being summoned hence, without some preparation or warning, to meet his God? Nevertheless, as it is the duty of all of us to submit to the Divine disposal with respect to the time and manner in which our lives shall be determined; so when the event has suddenly befallen one whom it overtakes in the career of duty, and whose life had given ample tokens of his having walked humbly and uprightly with his God; the awfulness of the visitation need not abate our firm hope and con-

^s Prov. xxviii. 14.

fidence that God hath mercifully taken him to himself.

These considerations, when duly “laid to heart,” will be of great power to sustain the mind under the apprehension of death, even in its most terrible forms; as well as to assuage the grief of surviving friends, that “they sorrow not as men without hope^h,” for them that depart hence in the Lord.

But let us turn from topics of private and personal feeling, to those which affect the community at large.

The value of every good man to the community, whatever may have been his rank or station, will not be denied by those who entertain just notions of the importance of religion in promoting the best interests of society. In this respect, Solomon’s remark is fully verified, that “the righteous is more excellent than his neighbourⁱ,” more excellent, as to the actual benefit he confers upon the state, as well as with reference to his own personal worth. Hence Solomon observes also, that “when it goeth well with the righteous, the city rejoiceth; and when the wicked perish, there is shouting^k.” This sentiment may be expected to prevail in every

^h 1 Thess. iv. 13. ⁱ Prov. xii. 26. ^k Prov. xi. 10.

well-ordered community: and according to its prevalence, we may judge both of the general character of the nation, and of its stability or weakness.

But the value of such men becomes still more apparent, when they are placed in stations of high authority and responsibility; when they are endowed with distinguished abilities and attainments; when they are called to the office of conducting public affairs in difficult times, and at a period when, to a more than usual extent, “iniquity abounds,” and “the overflowings of ungodliness make us afraid.” Under these circumstances, it is to the virtues, and not the talents only, of those who guide the helm of state, that we must look for success. The worth of these their excellent qualities is then especially felt; not only from the lustre of their good example, abashing the vicious and encouraging the well-disposed; nor merely from our confidence that they will not pursue measures injurious to pure religion or sound maxims of policy; but from the persuasion we cherish, that for the sake of such persons the Almighty himself may oftentimes suspend the judgments which would otherwise be inflicted upon a disobedient and gainsaying people. They may prevail with God to

exercise longsuffering and forbearance. They may stay the hand of uplifted justice; and thus be instrumental, in the way which of all others is least thought of by mere political observers, to the welfare and preservation of the state.

The public loss of the righteous, therefore, when they have been placed in prominent and commanding stations, is to be estimated in a twofold respect;—as it deprives the nation of their services, and as it cuts off one great source of security against those national calamities which we may have reason to apprehend from the Divine displeasure. Their sudden and violent removal may be dreaded as the forerunner of other misfortunes. They may be “taken away from the evil to come,” both in compassion to themselves and for a warning to others. Mercy and judgment may be the result of the same stroke:—mercy, to the victim of the blow;—judgment, to those upon whom its disastrous consequences will fall.

The intended application of these reflections is probably already anticipated by every one who hears me.

The event which has recently deprived our country of one of the most virtuous, upright, and able statesmen that ever guided the

councils of the nation ; and which, from the peculiar atrocity of its circumstances as well as the dread of its calamitous effects, has appalled the hearts of every reflecting member of the community ; seems to call for such animadversions as may induce us to “ lay it “ to heart,” with something more than that fleeting interest which the passing occurrences of the day commonly excite among us. More than common interest concerning it must, indeed, be felt in this Honourable Society ; of which the person to whom it relates was himself a member, not more distinguished by his elevated station than by the esteem, affection, and respect, of all with whom he was here associated.

Various topics present themselves to the mind, on this mournful occasion. Let us turn our thoughts, in the first place, to the personal loss that has been sustained.

Indiscriminate panegyric, especially of men raised to exalted station, is, for the most part, an easy task : since, under the cover of general and, perhaps, not altogether unmerited eulogium, it is often practicable to conceal great defects and blemishes, which the hand of an adversary would bring forward as prominent features in the portrait. But it rarely happens, as in the present instance, that such

appropriate commendations may be bestowed, as even an adversary would not venture to withhold, and which comprise, at the same time, all that the warmest advocate can desire to press upon our notice.

The points of character which raise a man above his fellows, and bring him nearest to the pattern of Christian perfection, are **PIETY**, **BENEVOLENCE**, and **SELF-CONTROL**, corresponding to the three great divisions of duty to God, our neighbour, and ourselves. These branch out into various ramifications, “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance¹ ;” which are designated by the Apostle as “the fruits of the Spirit,” because they proceed from the influence of the Holy Spirit, acting upon a mind ready and willing to cooperate with its suggestions. How far these were united in Him whose character is now under our contemplation, a few brief observations may suffice to shew.

They who have been accustomed to attend this sacred place, can bear testimony to the genuine, unostentatious **PIETY**, the strong devotional feelings of the mind, manifested in his habitual attendance on the public service

¹ Gal. v. 23.

of the Church, in his frequent participation of the Holy Communion, and in his steadfast adherence to the pure apostolical doctrine and discipline of our venerable Ecclesiastical Establishment. And in proof that these indications of piety were not assumed for mere outward show, or for secular interests, we find him carrying the substance as well as the form of religion into his daily occupations and concerns; intent upon the examination of its proofs and evidences; finding leisure, even in the midst of his laborious public duties, for the pursuits of a contemplative student; not only attentive to the word of God as a part of the ordinary duty of a practical Christian, but occasionally extending his researches into the more difficult departments of biblical inquiry; inculcating also its sacred truths, and its perfect rules of conduct, on all within the sphere of his influence; fearlessly avowing its principles in public; and modelling his domestic and personal habits in conformity with its injunctions.

From the religious principle thus deeply-rooted within him, sprang also that pure **BENEVOLENCE**, which is its proper fruit, and which, in the full and genuine acceptation of the term, may be considered as almost exclusively a Christian virtue. If, indeed, any one

virtue shone in this exalted character with more distinguished lustre than another, it seems to have been that of charity, in its most enlarged sense; an unbounded and ever active charity, exercised in humble imitation of that all-perfect Pattern, who “maketh His
“sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and
“sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust^m.” To seek for and to relieve the indigent and distressed, and even to anticipate applications to him for their relief, were among the labours and the purest pleasures of his life: and though worth and virtue were more especially sure to find in him a strenuous friend; yet were not his kindnesses refused to those whose claims upon his bounty might seem to be forfeited by their misconduct, and even by their injurious treatment of himself. Nor was this truly Christian spirit discernible only in the almost unparalleled extent of his daily beneficence, but also in every species of prompt assistance, of advice, of kindness, affection, and good-will, that an extensive intercourse with mankind and a constant inquiry into their various exigencies could suggest. Here, too, every thing was done with that Christian grace, which doubly enhanced the value of

^m Matth. v. 45.

the benefit ; in a way so modest, so unobtrusive, so little desirous to be seen of men, that oftentimes it might with truth be said, “ the left hand knew not what the right hand didⁿ. ”

In the same unaffected and unassuming manner was exercised that most difficult, perhaps, of all Christian attainments, SELF-CONTROL ; that mastery over the turbulent and unruly affections of the mind, which formed another conspicuous feature in his character. Daily engaged in public business, perpetually called into conflict with keen and powerful opponents, ever at his post of duty, shrinking not from personal toil or personal obloquy, we yet find his very assailants acknowledging his candour, his gentleness, his never failing equanimity, under every provocation.

These, it will be granted, constitute a rare assemblage of Christian virtues : and if to these we add his transacting multifarious concerns with ease, regularity and dispatch ; and, that, though so fully occupied with public cares, he bestowed attention on every necessary duty in other departments of social life ; we shall have traced a combination of qualities characterizing the Statesman, the Patriot,

ⁿ Matth. vi. 3.

the Scholar, the Husband, the Father, the Friend, and the Christian, well worthy of being held up to his contemporaries, and to posterity, as a bright example.

And now, if it be asked, what *predominant* quality gave its peculiar and appropriate cast to the whole character, and brought all the subordinate qualities to act in harmony with each other, so as to produce their full effect without any apparently extraordinary effort on the part of their possessor;—the answer is, that all this proceeded from one plain and simple principle, *a never-failing sense of DUTY*. Hence many matters of intricacy were simplified, and much labour of thought and perplexity of deliberation was spared. This was the advantage of *religious* wisdom. No crooked rules of policy were brought into consideration. The straight path alone was sought for and pursued. That being found, the mind was at ease; and the result was left to Providence. The business of one hour being discharged on its proper principle, new vigour was given for fresh exertions; and the business of the next hour was entered upon with the same cheerful alacrity. Thus time and labour were methodized, not merely by artificial arrangement, but by the habit of attending to every

thing in its regular course, as an act of duty. That with this habit were united mental powers of no ordinary kind, must indeed be supposed. But it is important to observe, that these *alone* could not have been adequate to the combination of so many rare excellencies, or to such undeviating consistency of conduct in the various concerns of life. To the same cause we must also attribute the humility, suavity, and candour, which marked his general deportment. Intent only on doing the thing which is right, he assumed no galling superiority, employed no bitter invective, no dishonest chicanery, to support his cause. Consciousness of rectitude, while it gave dignity and confidence to himself, disposed him to moderation and forbearance towards others. It needed no adventitious aid: it felt no weakness: but, trusting to the impression it must eventually make, relied on that for its ultimate success.

But we must turn now from this gratifying part of the subject, to direct our attention to other topics connected with it, of a far different description.

The deed of darkness by which this valuable life has been lost to the community, is of that base and malignant kind which instantly strikes us with horror and conster-

nation. What must we think, then, of him who could not only perpetrate the deed, but, disclaiming all passion or heat of resentment in the act, declare it to have been the cool deliberate purpose of his mind, and vindicate it as an act of retributive justice for inattention to his pretended, but imaginary wrongs? This is a rare instance, though, perhaps, not altogether unparalleled, of the strange obliquity of which the human mind is susceptible, when it sets aside all religious principle, and will be swayed by no authority but its own. Religion was indeed on the *lips* of this prodigy of iniquity; but it is evident that it had no influence upon his *heart*. Probably it was *assumed* only, for the purpose of giving a kind of sanctity to his crime, or of awakening in others a sympathy with his own prostituted feelings.

Behold, then, here, the state of one, whom God appears to have given over to a reprobate mind! For, “the Spirit of God will not always strive with man.” After being repeatedly grieved and resisted, it leaves the man to himself. Then it is that he becomes, as St. Paul describes him, “full of envy, murder, deceit, malignity; implacable, unmerciful;” and that, “knowing the judgment of God, that they who do such things are

“worthy of death,” he “not only does the same, but has pleasure in those that do them^o.” Nothing indeed, in this instance, could equal the atrocity of the crime itself, but the subsequent conduct of the criminal; whom we find acknowledging the offence to be a direct violation of God’s law, yet glorying in the deed; hardening himself against all attempts to awaken him to penitence or remorse; visited by no compunctions of conscience; and challenging the justice of the Almighty, even of Him who hath emphatically declared, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay^p!”

In contemplating this hideous picture, it is impossible not to feel humiliated by the reflection that it portrays one who was a fellow-countryman, and who even professed to be a fellow-Christian! The contemplation, however, would be somewhat less painful, if, amidst the general sensation of horror, indignation, and regret, which has been manifested on this occasion, from one end of the kingdom to the other, there had not been some few voices heard among us, expressive, not only of cold-blooded indifference, but even of savage complacency, towards the criminal and the crime! It would indicate a fearful change

^o Rom. i. 29.

^p Rom. xii. 19.

indeed in our national character, could we believe that these were the sentiments of any but the most deluded or depraved of an unthinking multitude, or of those who would goad them on to acts of desperation and madness, for the general subversion of society. “He who hateth his brother,” says the Apostle, “is a murderer in his heart^q.” How emphatically then might this be said of any who could rejoice in a deed like this! But the unequivocal declarations of the public sentiment, almost universally called forth, will more than suffice to wipe away this stain from the character of a civilized and religious people.

Notwithstanding, therefore, any discouraging symptoms of this kind, were they tenfold more numerous than they have been, let it not be said of us, “that because iniquity abounds, the love of many waxeth cold^r.” Rather let us consider that necessity is laid upon us for redoubled exertions. “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do^s?” If the very first principles of religion and morals were to be subverted, and men’s lives sacrificed for their adherence to them, vain would be any efforts for our national preservation. Then would be realized

^q 1 John iii. 15.

^r Matth. xxiv. 12.

^s Psalm xi. 3.

the Prophet Micah's description of a totally corrupted people:—"The good man is perished out of the earth: and there is none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood: they hunt every man his brother with a net^t."

Would to God that the bare possibility of our country ever being reduced to a state like this were generally laid to heart, as a motive for union and cooperation on the basis of religious, as well as political wisdom! The passions of evil-minded men would not then be so often kindled and stirred up to deeds of infamy, by the intemperate or inconsiderate effusions of party-spirit, administering perpetual food for discontent and turbulence. The responsibility incurred in this respect, by men of weight and influence in public life, does not appear to be always sufficiently considered, even among persons of honour, and probity, and zeal for the public good. In the heat of political animosity, it is, for the most part, little regarded, till some great convulsion in the state, or some such terrific event as that we have just experienced, discovers the error; and efforts are made (perhaps, too late!) to extinguish the flame that had been kindled, by many an one who scat-

^t Micah vii. 2.

tered firebrands around him, and said, Am I not in sport?

It is, then, our wisdom and our duty to ponder deeply this visitation of Providence. Severe as our loss has been, and most appalling in its circumstances, it may thus be turned to our profit. It has already given occasion to one instructive lesson, in the development of a character eminently good and great, and so exercised in every good word and work as to incite every well-disposed mind to emulate its lustre. It has also developed a character of an opposite kind, uncontrolled by religious principle or moral feeling, and following only the bent of a most corrupt heart. It has awakened a salutary alarm of danger, and a jealous solicitude for the national character, deeply injured by so atrocious an offence. And though it may have disclosed, in some few of the refuse of our land, dispositions at which every Christian shudders; yet has it called forth a general burst of virtuous grief and abhorrence among all ranks and degrees of men, most creditable to our national feelings. Let us hope, too, that it has excited, in many, a desire for a return to better principles and better conduct; a desire to diffuse that "wisdom and knowledge," which alone, under

Providence, can be “the stability of our “times” ;” the wisdom of obedience to God and man, and the knowledge of those principles, political and religious, by which our forefathers raised this country to its proud preeminence, and bequeathed to their posterity the best inheritance they can enjoy on this side the grave.

Such endeavours, we may be assured, God will yet bless and prosper. “The Lord’s hand “is not shortened, that it cannot save ; nei- “ther his ear heavy, that it cannot hear^x.” He teaches us the vanity of trusting in man, by shewing how suddenly “his breath goeth “forth, and all his thoughts perish^y.” He gives us an awful warning of our own perishable state, and an admonition to trust in Him only, who is our “everlasting strength.” He it is, who can yet raise up for us the wise and the virtuous, men capable, under His guidance, of conducting the vessel of state through storms and tempests, and of preserving it amidst the general wreck of surrounding kingdoms and empires.

To obtain His favour, then, is our first and chief concern. To “trust in the Lord, “and be doing good^z ;” to place a religious

^u Isa. xxxiii. 6.

^y Ps. cxlvi. 4.

^x Isa. lix. 1.

^z Ps. xxxvii. 3.

dependence upon Him, and at the same time to be zealous and faithful in the discharge of all public and private duties; this is the course we have to pursue. And if in the discharge of these, we be exposed to perils and trials, to obloquy and reproach, to envy, hatred, and malice, nay to the arm of fury, and death itself;—let us not be dismayed, “neither be of doubtful mind.” For, “verily “there *is* a reward for the righteous; doubt-
“less there *is* a God that judgeth in the
“earth^a.” If we “die the death of the right-
“eous, our last end,” in the great day of the Lord, “shall be like his^b.” And whether the stroke that terminates our present life come sooner or later, whether it be gradual or sudden, whether in the ordinary course of nature or by the hand of violence, “Blessed
“is that servant, whom his Lord when he
“cometh shall find so doing^c!”

^a Psalm lviii. 11.^b Numb. xxiii. 10.^c Luke xii. 43.

THE END.





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